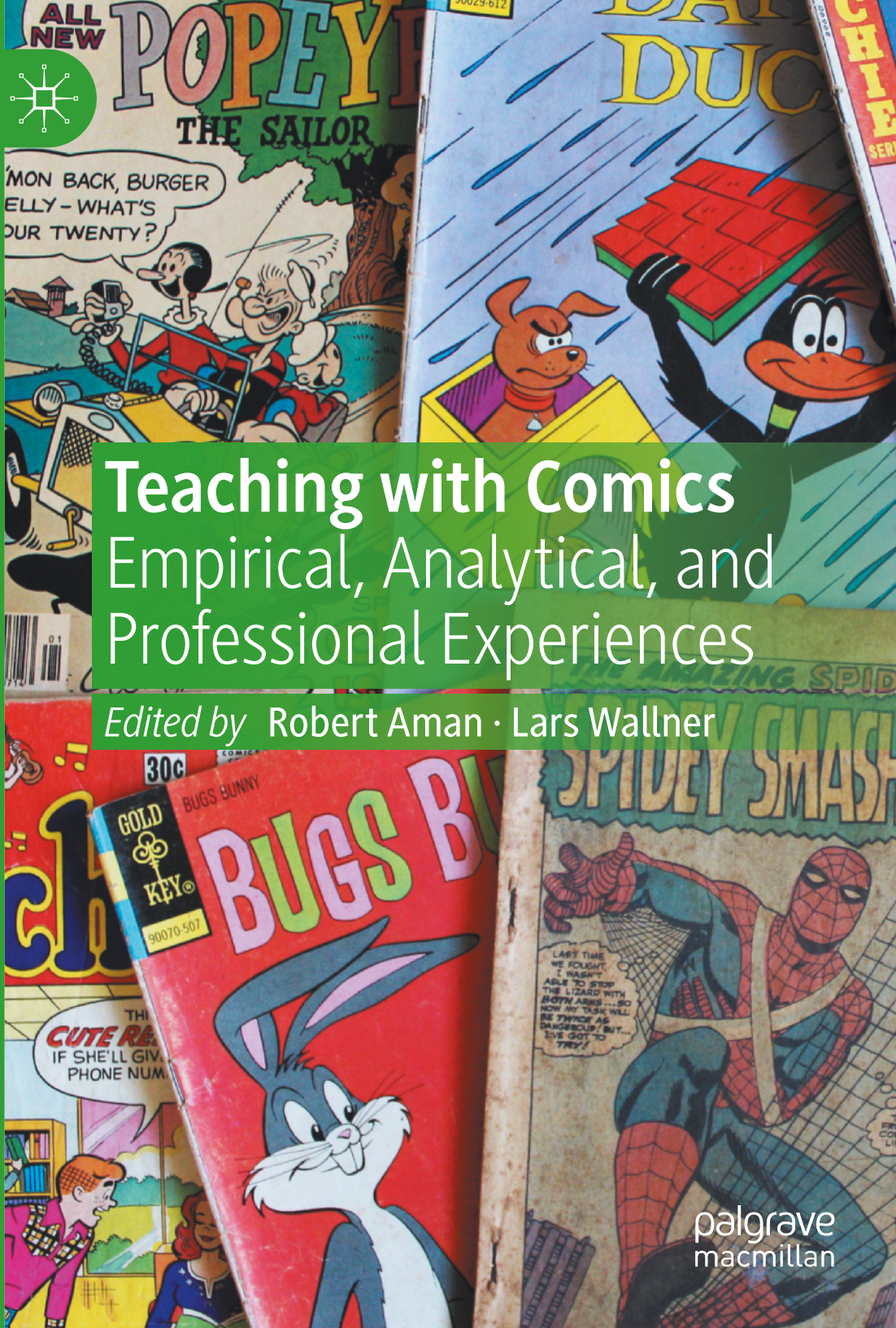

Teaching with Comics

Empirical, Analytical, and Professional Experiences

Edited by Robert Aman · Lars Wallner

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Introduction: Teaching with Comics: Empirical, Analytical, and Professional Experiences

Robert Aman and Lars Wallner

When psychologist William Moulton Marston (1943, p. 36)—creator of *Wonder Woman*—theorized the appeal of the comics medium among readers in the journal *American Scholar*, he argued that the appeal is woven into the very fabric of its nature. "The potency of the picture story is not a matter of modern theory but of anciently established truths", Marston (1943, p. 37) writes, "[b]efore man thought in words he felt in pictures". For this very reason, Marston argued that comics have proved effective in teaching school subjects. He takes the teaching of English as an example. According to Marston, excerpts from the, at the time, relatively new comic book hero Superman had been used successfully in

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teaching English at junior high schools in Massachusetts, USA. Enthusiastically, Marston describes how a special Superman workbook has been compiled by "a progressive young English instructor". He rounds off his text by declaring that despite the fact that these developments around the use of comics in the classroom are only in their early stages, it is impossible to overlook the fact that the medium of comics hold "tremendous possibilities indicated by initial experiments" as teaching tools.

Marston was far from alone within American academia to advocate for the use of comics in education at this time. W. W. D. Sones (1944, p. 232), a professor of education at University of Pittsburgh, reports that between 1935 and 1944 comics "evoked more than a hundred critical articles in educational and non-professional periodicals". Sones (1944) himself conducted a series of studies on using comic books in education, concluding that comics are valuable teaching tools. His article is symptomatic of an increased scholarly focus on comics. It was published in a special issue of the *Journal of Educational Sociology*, which devoted the entirety of an issue to the topic. Against this background, it seems fair to suggest that Marston, Sones, as well as other scholars who sought to design comics-supported curriculum for American schools (e.g. Dorrell et al., 1995; Hutchinson, 1949), would have welcomed a publication such as the one the reader holds in their hands. With a focus on primary and secondary education, *Teaching with comics* is a collection that brings together renowned scholars, authors, and artists, from different corners of the map. With a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and interest in different comics traditions, the authors exemplify and discuss the ways in which comics can be used to teach different schools subjects.

Comics and Education

Comics are often described as a form of theatre with stationary actors. The movement, however, has never been missing; each panel is a summary of a time lapse, an implicit movement, as sequential art (Eisner, 1985). The definition(s) of comics, graphic novels, bandes dessinées, graphica, or comix, is a messy and entangled scholarly affair (Groensteen, 2007; McCloud, 1994; Meskin, 2007), and not one for us to sort out

in this collection. The strive for, and struggle of, a unifying definition of comics has perhaps become another reason why the academic field is still struggling for legitimization (see, e.g., Meskin, 2007). This struggle for academic and cultural legitimacy is also endemic of the way that comics are still not unitarily accepted within the walls of classrooms.

The suitability and usefulness of comics in classrooms are dependent on what can be learned from them. When discussing comics as a classroom material, it needs to be acknowledged that recent scholarship has granted the early decades of the comics industry considerable attention, discussing troubling representations of, predominately, ethnicity, race, and gender. Examples include colonialist and white supremacist representations (Boukari-Yabara, 2007; McKinney, 2011) and Strömberg's (2001, 2012) mapping of both racist and anti-Semitic illustrations in American, Belgian-French, and Swedish comics. A case in point is Hergé's *Tintin au Congo*—first published as an album in 1931 and written when the Congo was under Belgian rule from 1876 to 1960—which sings the praise of colonial presence in central Africa and contains familiar racist stereotypes about black Africans.

In reference to the American comics industry, Singer (2002, p. 107) similarly contends that predominantly superhero comics have a "long history of excluding, trivializing, or 'tokenizing' minorities". Other scholars have confirmed this picture by identifying the genre of superheroes as a predominately white male-dominated power fantasy (e.g. Gateward & Jennings, 2015; Singer, 2002) with a conservative leaning (e.g. Curtis, 2015; DiPaolo, 2011). Furthermore, several researchers have also directed the spotlight on sexism and misogyny within the genre as part of gendered representations (e.g. Robinson, 2004; Stabile, 2009), while others have more broadly focused on troubling illustrations of gender differences, ability, and physical representations (Robbins, 2002).

Disturbing representations in comics partly sparked a backlash during the 1950s as Wertham published his (in)famous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). In the book, he targets descriptions of an explicit sexual and violent nature found in comics of the period. Wertham goes so far as to assert that the practice of reading comics leads to juvenile delinquency. Based on such a behaviourist interpretation, comics are viewed as a negative pedagogical force that teaches children undesirable behaviours

and leads them into the destructive life path of crime. In short: children become and do what they read (Aman, 2020). In the USA, the critique against the medium lead to the self-regulatory Comics Code authority. Not limited to an American context, similar debates around comics' possible negative impact on young readers occurred in various corners of the world: France (Crépin 2001), South Korea (Lent, 1999), Australia (Osbrone 1999), and Mexico (Rubenstein, 1998).

At the same time, important work has recently been done on the ways in which comics can challenge worldviews and offer alternatives, something which offers educationalists interesting materials for classroom work. Some researchers identify a shift in the American comics industry during the 1960s as writers increasingly started to see themselves as social critics (Moore, 2003). This includes a shift in content from oblique narrative metaphors towards direct representation of racism, sexism, and class politics; social dimensions on both an individual and structural level in American society that previously had been overlooked in superhero comics (Costello, 2009; Moore, 2003). A similar phenomenon on the intersection between comics and political and societal developments has been identified in, for example, Swedish comics. Recent scholarship highlights the increase of titles during the 1970s and 1980s filled with feminist (Nordenstam, 2014) and antiracist messages (Aman, 2016, 2018).

Other studies, on more contemporary comics from different parts of the world, have centred on, among other aspects, working-class perspectives in comics drawing parallels between certain comics with a stated working-class perspective and working-class literature (Nilsson, 2019), comics indulged with queer feminist imaginations (D'Agostino, 2018), and the use of irony in black comics (Wanzo, 2015) and satire in feminist comics (Jönsson, 2014; Lindberg, 2014). As an example of classroom work with comics, Letizia (2020) writes on comics as tools for studying and discussing questions around citizenship. Thus, there is ample supply of comics that challenge existing societal norms and perspectives on how to utilize these comics.

Meanwhile, there is a limited, and highly fragmented, body of scholarship on the use of comics and graphic novels as a material for educational

practice (Tilley & Weiner, 2017; Wallner & Eriksson Barajas, 2020). Recent studies on comics as school materials show their versatility and usefulness in terms of, for instance, enhancing literacy (Wallner, 2017), foreign language learning (Graham, 2011), the teaching of sciences (Cheesman, 2006), and engaging in gender discussions (Dallacqua & Low, 2019). The use of visual literature enables teachers to engage students of different levels of language skill and opens for engagement with social issues textually and visually (Wallner, 2017). Thus, comics are a versatile medium, motivating youths to read and learn but also to engage in social issues.

The existing research also predominately takes a *literary* perspective on analysing the comics themselves, their characteristics, and how they can be *potentially* useful for teaching, whereas much of the existing classroom research with comics is done from a reading or literacy perspective (e.g. Hammond, 2009; Helsby, 1999; see also Wallner, 2017). Other research has shown the motivating power of using comics in order to attract young people to reading (Laycock, 2007; Norton, 2003), which shows only a few of the strengths of using these materials in classrooms. Just as education, comics studies is a diverse, interdisciplinary field, consisting of multiple intersecting branches of academic perspectives, and we think that this edited collection reflects that. In their book, *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy: Teaching, Learning, and Comics* (2020), Kirtley, Garcia, and Carlson write that they "see a distinct need to promote discourse around comics in education that moves across grade levels, with theory and scholarship helping to legitimize teaching graphic narratives K-12, and K-12 instructors inspiring academics to explore new areas for research" (Kirtley et al., 2020, p. 247). This volume addresses some of that need, in an attempt to further comics research taking place in, or relevant to, K-12 classrooms. Today, comics are increasingly recognized and used in classrooms around the world. A reason for this is the breadth of comics today and the possibility of finding comic books that address most topics, questions, and themes.

Outline of the Book

With a focus on primary and secondary education, this edited collection brings together renowned scholars and professionals from around the world. With a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and interest in different comics traditions, the authors discuss the ways in which comics can be used to teach different schools subjects. The various chapters are not limited to learning *about* comics but address the ways in which a subject can be learned *with* and *through* comics. The contributors are researchers, teachers, librarians, comics artists, and creators with vast experience of reading, making, and using comics in the classroom. The book is divided into four major sections: *Comics as a Tool for Inquiry*, *Art Education*, *Language, Culture, and Communication*, and *Social Sciences*.

The chapters included in the first section, *Comics as a Tool for Inquiry*, focus on methodological interrogations and on how to help pupils read comics with a focus on interpretation, analysis, and inquiry. To open the discussion, Clio Ding examines comics in relation to a larger discussion around art and reflects upon common attitudes towards the role of comics in the academic realm and art classroom. The argument advanced is that comics should be taught as a form of art both in and outside tertiary levels of education, using critical evaluation frameworks and pedagogies based on art criticism. This in turn allows for an analysis and critique of comics alongside fine art and other visual cultures as a way to remove the hierarchies between the various forms.

In Chapter 2, Noran Amin takes a point of departure in personal experiences in the teaching of comics. A conclusion drawn is on the importance of leading students to understand the interplay between the verbal and the visual in comics, and the interdisciplinarity of the medium. In order to help teachers to achieve this, Amin introduces an analytical tool called "The Interrogative mode" that brings together various forms of comics criticism and works as a helpful lens to analyse comics. The chapter also presents a sample syllabus with different comics (different in format, genre, style, and creators' genders) and demonstrates how this analytical tool can serve specific teaching purposes.

In Chapter 3, Dona Pursall draws attention to the humorous side of comics. According to Pursall, the comedic side of comics is connected to

conflict and identity, as funny moments draw attention to boundaries of taste, culture, or other markers of distinction. Bringing together humour research, comics studies, and education, Pursall argues that classroom discussions centred on humour in comics invite teachers and pupils alike to think about themselves and their own boundaries, and about those of others.

The second section includes chapters that discuss comics as part of Art Education with a focus on literacy, social issues, and empowerment, both in reading and making comics. In Chapter 4, Cathy G. Johnson makes a direct contribution to art education with a concrete lesson plan for high school or secondary studies. According to Johnson, a lesson on comics can be developed through five different pedagogical values: teamwork, ideation, literacy, self-actualization, and fun. These pedagogical values reveal themselves, Johnson stresses, in how comics create opportunities for group activities in a relaxed manner, empower students to create who may be hesitant in a traditional arts classroom, and help grow literacy skills by engaging students with innovative approaches to reading and writing.

In Chapter 5, Ana Pedrazzini, Constanza Zinkgräf, Paola D'Adamo, and Mariana Lozada discuss results from two workshops on comics for primary students in Argentina, in which the participants were asked to produce a comic related to social inequalities. The thirty-three students produced panels filled with imaginary and experiential situations that addressed injustices related to gender, ethnicity, and social class among others. According to the researchers, this evidenced a committed or a committed-playful motivation. In conclusion, the group of researchers argue for viewing the use of cartooning in schools as a tool to foster students' agency, multimodal communication, and civic engagement to be employed in social sciences, language, and visual arts.

In the final chapter of this section, Hannah Sackett takes a different approach to the teaching of comics within the field of arts education. Instead of a focus on comic-making as a route to the development of personal and artistic skills, Sackett asks what happens when comic-making is presented as a form of open-ended art practice, without set objectives or known outcomes. By making use of pedagogical ideas from cartoonist Lynda Barry and by illustrator Martha Newbigging, the

chapter advocates for an alternative approach to making comics in the classroom.

The third section focuses on comics as teaching tools for Language, Culture, and Communication, addressing topics such as the teaching of foreign languages through comics, reading comprehension, and critical thinking. In Chapter 7, Eva Van de Wiele, Michel De Dobbeleer, and Mara Santi discuss the use of comics in foreign language learning. Based on three workshops on Italian comics within the aesthetics lessons for sixteen-year-olds in a Belgian school, the chapter explores how the pupils' readings grapple with cultural, social, and economics topics. In addition to their attention to the form, content, and language of the comics. The chapter closes off by arguing for the usefulness of comics in learning about other cultures as part of different school subjects.

In Chapter 8, Laurence Grove tells the interesting story of how Albert Uderzo's diminutive Gallic hero Asterix and his friend Obelix became part of the Scottish curriculum. This means that children in Scottish classrooms who study French follow the adventures of Asterix. The chapter provides an overview of the project, before asking how other activities might similarly raise public awareness of the important cultural role of comics.

In the next chapter, Ashley K. Dallacqua, Dani Kachorsky, and Sara Kersten Parrish bring together results from studies of three different classrooms as they explore the ways in which comics could be used to challenge school norms and support literacy practices. The authors argue that comics can function as supportive texts with the potential to increase reading comprehension and content knowledge as part of the regular curricula.

In the final chapter as part of this strand, Sylvia Pantaleo discusses the ways in which comics can foster creativity and critical thinking. Based on data from a classroom-based study where elementary students explore and design their own science comics, Pantaleo demonstrates how intentionally designed pedagogy, and student opportunities to critically explore and create with the medium of comics, can foster creativity in learners.

The fourth and final section, with a focus on Social Sciences, includes chapters dealing with how comics can be used to combat racism, engage

in source criticism, and work with visual empathy. In Chapter 11, Michael F. Scholz explores the use of comics in studying and teaching the history of East Germany as part of German history during the Cold War. In making use of comics published during the period from after World War II and up to the fall of the Berlin wall, Scholz shows how to motivate with comics and how comics can be used to stimulate critical thinking and to practise historical source criticism.

In Chapter 12, Grace D. Gipson argues for the importance to consider how comics used in education deals with questions around race and gender. To facilitate such discussion, Gipson addresses the ways in which a syllabus that centres on blackness and intersectionality can be developed with a particular focus on black female voices and their respective character storylines. This is also done by way of so-called hashtag syllabi and accompanying textual analysis, which, Gipson proposes, allows the opportunity to create an ongoing archive, while simultaneously making comics more accessible, discoverable, and open for engagement.

In Chapter 13, Zane Elward reflects on the medium in relation to history pedagogy as he argues that comics can materialize the past, allowing students to grapple with the complexities of history. Drawing on the examples of two graphic novels, *Berlin* by Jason Lutes and *The Ukrainian Notebooks*, by Igor, Elward argues that these comics invite readers to a world they can inhabit. This in turn offers great possibilities for deepening students' understanding of the past and eliciting a connection to previous time periods, fostering empathy for the experiences and perspectives of others.

Lastly, Kirby Childress puts the spotlight on migration and refugees in contemporary Europe, with a focus on Jérôme Ruillier's comic *Les Mohamed* from 2011, which zooms in on North African immigrants who arrived in France during the 1960s as work force labour in various factories. Central to the themes of these stories is the double identity immigrants feel, not belonging fully to their new or their home countries. Childress makes the argument that *Les Mohamed* can be understood as an example of "visual empathy", where the illustrations of life stories enable classroom discussions on racism and on how to develop understanding for others.

In sum, in approaching these subjects from different angles, the chapters that make up this edited collection aim to spark insight and foster imaginative teaching and learning by engaging with comics and graphic novels in the classroom. Regardless of school system or subject, we hope that there is something useful for everyone in these chapters.

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