

The Other side of the Toon: Analyzing the positives of Comics.

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Abstract:

Comics are usually looked down upon as a piece of literature. It has multitudinous advantages which are not taken into consideration most of the times. Comics is read by a wide number of audience and has had a huge impact on many. Though the advantages, reading comics mostly academically is not much encouraged and they are not incorporated as a text in the educational field. In this paper, the researcher looks upon and analyses the advantages of comics. The paper defends the reading of comics as it is helpful in many ways and hence looks into a new perspective of learning and teaching which is more interesting and impactful.

Keywords: Comics, Education, Advantages, Academics, Literature

Majority of the population is aware what comics are and have certainly read them during childhood. Who doesn't remember flipping through those fun filled colorful cartoon pages? It is certainly not easy to forget the impact comics had on each one. The lessons comics have taught us, the characters it has introduced to us who have taught us to laugh and so much more. It has had a huge impact on our childhood, but still it was and is mostly read undercover by children.

What is comics? Comic is a periodical containing comic strips, intended chiefly for children. It consists of stories that are shown and expressed in terms of images and illustrations. The texts i.e. the dialogue or narration and sound effects are all shown with the help of speech balloons or

captions etc. Comics have always been there from the very beginning, we can associate comics to the pictures that were drawn inside the cave, i.e. cave paintings or drawings in sequence telling a story. To go back to the history of comics, it has different timeline in different cultures. Through studies we can find out that it was approximately in the mid-20th century that comics flourished, particularly in the United States, France, Japan etc. India being a diverse country, it had comics based on religious myth and folk- tales.

Academic reading of comics is not much encouraged. The question that arises here is that though comics has numerable advantages why reading it is not much encouraged? Also why is it not incorporated in the educational field? Why is it considered as low literature?

This topic has been much in discussion from many years but the results have not yet to be seen entirely as implicated. Comics is something that majority of the children read during their childhood and still remember the stories and the fond memories it created as it has been proved that visual has more impact on one's mind than text. Keeping in mind the impact that visual has, one can argue that cinema also has the same impact and can be incorporated in the educational field. But here one thing should be understood is that watching a cinema is time bound whereas reading comics is not and yet this feature is exclusive to comics. Students, especially poor readers can take their time to understand the text and the visuals make the text more simplified to be understandable.

Asking the question "Why Comics Studies?" is like asking the question "Why Cinema, Television, Game, or Media Studies?" As a medium, comics are older than film, television, and video games, and yet there has been resistance from within the academy to the serious study and analysis of this medium.

"The negative attitude towards comics perhaps comes from the form of comics itself. The early association of comics with the superhero genre in the western culture brought in a lot of youth and thus it became a youth oriented culture. It was for a long time considered the lowliest of the popular cultural media. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham further sealed the deal in 1954 when he published his controversial and influential book *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he proclaimed that the violent and unsavory actions and questionable sexual exploits depicted in comics (in particular, crime and horror comics) encouraged like-minded behavior in children." (Ndalianis, 113)

"Recalling his early years as an underground comic-book writer, Harvey Pekar commented recently, "it was clear that you could do anything with comics that you could do with any other art form, but less of it was being done." (Roeder, 2).

"The scholars that are anti comics seem to be worried about the loss of canonical texts through a school curriculum." (Hatfield, 371).

The objective of the paper is to discover the advantages of comics and hence make learning more interesting. Also reading comics builds up on the reading skills hence looking into that aspect of the advantages which specially helps the poor readers or slow learners.

The theory used in this paper is the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning by Richard Mayer. Cognition means acquiring knowledge, the theory talks about acquiring knowledge through multimedia learning i.e. learning with more than one medium.

And that is where comics comes into picture and comics is the combination of two mediums: the text medium and the visual art medium.

“This theory states that people learn more deeply and the outcome is more likely when one learns with words AND pictures rather than with words or pictures alone. This theory proposes three main assumptions when it comes to learning with multimedia:

1. There are two separate channels (auditory and visual) for processing information (sometimes referred to as Dual-Coding theory);
2. Each channel has a limited (finite) capacity (similar to Sweller’s notion of Cognitive Load);
3. Learning is an active process of filtering, selecting, organizing, and integrating information based upon prior knowledge.” (Mayer, 2)

Hence through the theory, the research states that comics can have a huge and deep impact on one’s mind. And this impact can be used in an appropriate manner by incorporating comics into the educational field.

Through this process studies have proved that learning will be more in depth and stays in memory longer. “Comics have their own place and play a role in children’s literature.” Says Nicholas Tucker. (Harvey, 81) “Reading comics involves a complex, multimodal literacy; and by using comics in our classrooms, we can help students develop as critical and engaged readers of multimodal texts.” (Jacobs, 19). According to McLaughlin (2005), “initially, the argument against comic book reading was made by the guardians of children’s culture, teachers and librarians, who feared the contamination of children’s culture by comic books.” (Revathy, 70) “It was only towards the end of the 20th century that comics started to get acceptance within the academic circle. Scholars began to recognize that it can be used as an authentic material to teach students, as they exposed them to real- life situations, the social and political scenario of the time and the language that people use in their daily conversations. Hence it can be used by the language facilitators to instill many language skills. Comics help improve learner’s comprehending ability, vocabulary, speaking skills, creativity and innovation, soft skills etc.” (Revathy, 72)

Productivity in the classroom can be increased through the use of comics in English language classroom. It helps the students with the smooth accusation of the English language. The main benefits of using comic elements for communicative language classroom students are: ensuring low student anxiety, improvement in retention, spontaneous participation of students, increase in enjoyment in learning for students and a more congenial classroom atmosphere. Studying comics is difficult because of its distinctive qualities as text and thus it becomes difficult to paraphrase. When discussing about comics with the audience it is again difficult to communicate as there is

no plot summery for comics. Comics are daunting not only because of their long histories but also because of their complex, multimodal expressions.

Through select Tinkle Comics, the researcher gives evidences that there are multitudinous advantages of comics which can make it to be incorporated in the educational sector.

‘Tinkle’ comic for children mainly published in India is a comic that mostly all the children have read in their childhood. The book contains 90% of comics, then puzzles and quizzes etc. In the magazine, the comic titled ‘Anu Club’, having the tagline ‘The fun way to learn science.’ is one of the best comic strip to learn many basic things about science in a way that is easy and interesting.

In the research by Eastman we see that firstly the plight of science students are highlighted. “How some students just find it so hard to go in sync with science and at last exclaim that they can’t do it and that they are not good for science! The public view on science is not a friendly one. In a public school it’s not difficult to find students who would describe their science class as dry due to all the vocabulary and fact memorization they have to do. In its essence, science is a way of thinking. Science happens when a person observes a phenomenon and wishes to explain it. One then collects data and evidence to create a theory. This process is not limited to any specific content area or context. Yet, here students claim that he or she is just no good at science.

In the research project, comics are used in place of a genetics text for a seventh-grade science classroom. These comics were intended to achieve the same goals as county-provided texts and assessments. The assessments were compared with the assessments from other units, and student understanding was also evaluated through student-made comics describing the concepts of inheritance. Some assumptions were made:

- Comics engage students in a way that increases their motivation to read. The skills involved in reading comics mirror skills necessary to read and understand scientific diagrams and graphs prevalent in traditional texts.
- Storytelling elements found in comics create a human and historical element not found in traditional scientific texts.

It was observed that that the students understood the concepts easily and grasped it with much more ease. Science finds a valuable partner in the comic book. The medium allows information to be conveyed effectively. Comics create stories and characters that make the science content relevant and personal to the student.

The researcher states that he has rarely seen students show such interest in the content, as well as invest themselves so personally in a topic. If our goal as teachers is to convey the wonder and utility of science to all students, comics are the perfect tools.

Hence through this research we can understand that how useful comics are in the educational field.

The comic Anu Club in Tinkle is about a girl Anu who has a group of 4 more friends. Together with them she visits her uncle who is a scientist and who tries to teach them science and experiments in a fun and easier way. The children tend to think that uncle is a magician and that he knows lots of magic but at the end of the story it is explained that the trick was not merely a magic trick but it was science behind it. If this comic strip was only in the medium of pictures or just texts it wouldn't have had such an impact on children. The visual quality of comics increases learning. And not being time bound one can take their own time to see the pictures and understand the context and bring out meaning comparing the image and the text, this property being unique to comics alone.

We can also see the story of 'Super Weirdos' in Tinkle which is the story of some set of people who are not normal, they have some kind of power and are different from other people. They form their own community and start using their special powers or capabilities for the betterment of the society. And hence it teaches us that being a little different is also accepted in the society and there is nothing to feel bad or feel like being rejected about it. Whatever we have in us, we can use it for the betterment of the society. The images, the texts, the graphics all have an impact on the mind and helps the mind to remember it for a longer time. The grasping power and the retention power increases due to the multimedia and hence it also proves to be beneficial for the slow readers. Through the pictures, initial small texts, comics arouses the interest of students who are not much inclined towards reading, and hence it builds up the reading skills. The relaxed atmosphere which comes with the positive humor in comics also increases the retention power. Positive humor has always helped be it anywhere to get relaxed and retain things more. With the changes in time, the teaching pattern or method also changes. And as for learner- centered classroom atmosphere, comics can be used to minimize students' anxiety.

Other than these examples there are also comics on student entertainment. Comics that provide a little entrainment too with studies. The comic element in the text as well as the image together make the comics more interesting and forms an impression in our mind as it becomes influential. E.g. the comic story of Pyarelal in Tinkle which broke all stereotypes, wherein the husband Pyare who is a kind villager who lives in Hastipur with his wife Lajo is ready to help or find solutions to any problem but at start always messes it up. He would do things according to what and how he thought it is supposed to be done, but as the head of the family he also discusses the topic at home and asks opinion from his wife who advises him which proves beneficial. This was one of the earlier comic strip of tinkle, hence got printing during the 1980's wherein these ideas were not much practiced.

Through the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, the reader is able to understand the context better. When cognition of the text is done through multimedia learning, the retention power is increased and the context and knowledge lasts long in memory.

The research also states that there can sometimes be a negative effect of comics on children as they might just look at the pictures and not the text. We can see the 2 most important reasons apart from others for the parents/teachers to put restrictions on kids for reading comics- Criticism

implies that comics are dangerous to the child's character and mental health and an undesirable influence on the child's cultural development takes place. In the study we can see that only one out of ten agrees that comics are useful of children in educational field. Comics for children and comics about families are still approved of, but adventure stories are little commended and highly deplored. The most widely deplored are Superman, Batman, Dick Tracy etc. The opinion varies from segment to segment of the population. It's the men who agree on reading comics than the women. The younger than the older and so on. It's the adults own reading habits too that is the strongest factor in determining their opinion on children reading comics. The more the adults have read comics the more they approve of the coming generation to read it.

But though all these, the researcher states that only select comics should be incorporated in the educational field and not all. Comics are the best way of developing new teaching strategies. And it is supported with claim and enormous number of examples ranging from Economics to political science to psychology, sociology, responsibilities, abilities etc. all in one.

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