Nancy B. Sardone

Teaching Classic Literature with Comic Books and Virtual Lit Trips

Using student-created examples, the author demonstrates how comic-book creation and Google Earth can help students develop deeper connections to classic literary figures.

At the start of any school year, often groans are heard even before the announcement that [insert any classic literature work here] is on the docket in English classes across the nation. It cannot be the "story" or the characters, as we are addicted to "the story," played out in some version every night on television. We watch our favorite characters and invest in their lives in varying degrees. Therefore, it must be something other than the stories and characters causing these groans. Could it be the language found in these texts, such as Shakespearean prose or the English language as tied to social norms of yesteryear? If English language is a barrier to learning as it is for more than 5.3 million students currently enrolled in our K–12 educational system (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition), and we find ways for ELLs (English Language Learners) to become part of the classroom experience by accommodating instructional materials to fit their needs, so too, we must accommodate for CLLs (Classic Literature Learners)!

This article describes the assignments I created to engage preservice teachers in designing instructional materials that befit today's students to help them overcome hurdles sometimes present when learning classic literature. Secondary and middle school English teachers may find these assignments useful as well so their students, too, have a chance to experience the stories of classic literature and to invest in the timeless characters found within.

Comic Books

For more than 70 years, comic books have entertained readers with their format of combining words and pictures in a story. Some categorize comics as a form of *graphica,* a "medium of literature that integrates pictures and words and arranges them cumulatively to tell a story or convey information; often presented in comic strip, periodical, or book form; also known as comics" (Thompson 6). Studies have found that comics appeal to students from myriad backgrounds, cultures, and personalities (Schwarz) and know no socioeconomic boundaries in terms of the amount of comic book reading performed among subjects (Ujiie and Krashen). Comics are appealing to boys, as they tend to be written toward their interests and motivate them to engage in reading, improving their language literacy (Atwell; Guevara). They appeal to ELLs due to the lessened load of text found in comics and increased picture support (McPherson). Comics also appeal to the wider generation dubbed Generation Visual, because the visual representations of text are appealing, comfortable, and engaging (Lyga and Lyga).

The comic book project (http://comicbookproject.org) is one national afterschool program developed as a pathway to academic reinforcement and literacy development, social awareness, and character development (Bitz). Some comic-book themes for high school students include creative writing and character analysis. Researchers and educators promote the use of comic books in all areas of instruction as an effective and powerful way to get students engaged in their own learning (McVicker).

Asking students to create a theme-based comic book is a powerful way to motivate them to engage. The appeal of comics is that they resemble our non-visual self-awareness, so we inherently identify with them, whereas we react to a more realistically drawn character as being separate from ourselves. Comics are conceptually closer to words than realistic portrayals are, and therefore words and cartoons together form a "unified language" (McCloud).

Along with developing content knowledge and engaging in a reflective analysis of characters, comic-book projects also provide opportunities for technology skills development, as students learn more about photo-editing techniques and design concepts, such as page layout and color theory. Software programs used in comic-book creation include Paint.net, Microsoft PowerPoint, and any Creative Commons website such as Flickr for photo editing (http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/). Script writing and storyboarding are an added bonus for students! Working with construction materials such as these makes it essential

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that learners articulate what they have accomplished and reflect on their activity and observations to learn the lessons that their activity has to teach (Howland, Jonassen, and Marra). In this activity, it is important that students know the material, or they will not be able to articulate the objective of the lesson through the comic book.

Students Composing Comics for Character Analysis

A preservice teacher I worked with, Kristin Kohler, created a comic-composing activity as a prototype for her future students after reading *The Great Gatsby.* For the assignment, students would choose a character from the novel whom they felt was misrepresented. For example, Daisy Buchanan is portrayed as a devious woman in *The Great Gatsby*; however, there are many mitigating factors readers might take into account that refute Daisy's representation as devious. This assignment asks students to create a comic in which textual evidence from *The Great Gatsby* is used to support their alternative view of the character. This lesson is designed to help students understand characters better and to get them to engage in multiple perspectives of the

FIGURE 1. Comic Book Prototype

FIGURE 2. Comic Book Prototype

other characters in the novel by viewing the comic books of their peers.

Another student teacher, Courtney Olsen, decided on a new approach to teaching *Romeo and Juliet.* She created her own comic book prototype (see figs. 1 and 2 for excerpts) to showcase to students before they read the classic piece. This way, her comic would help the students develop a better understanding of the plot before getting lost in the complex language of William Shakespeare. She could also use her comic after students read the play to give students the opportunity to relate the story to their own lives.

A different approach asks students to compose comic books by taking their own pictures and writing the story through their point of view, while following the original storyline (as this student teacher did). As Stephen Abram suggests, "creating a comic book is one of those simple things that

can help learners learn and be a lot of fun too" (25). Constructive learning is necessary in a classroom to achieve meaningful learning (Howland, Jonassen, and Marra). Increased critical thinking comes into play when students are asked to create a comic book that does not just require them to regurgitate information about a story or time in history, but to reflect on the story to determine character construction or plot analysis (Howland, Jonassen, and Marra). By reflecting on this educational experience, "learners integrate their new experiences with their prior knowledge about the world" (3), resulting in a deeper understanding of the emotional and complex meaning behind a work such as *Romeo and Juliet.*

As an alternative, students could create a comic book based on their comprehension of the entire story or build one that analyzes specific plot elements, or specific main or secondary characters in the creative format of a comic book. Finally, based on their understanding of the story, students could construct an alternate ending to the story. This assignment would allow students to articulate the concepts they learned from their reading of *Romeo and Juliet* and apply their new knowledge to a creative context.

Another assignment asked students to re-create the five scenes from *Macbeth,* with a comic book designed by then high school student Alyssa Sardone (my daughter). This assignment demonstrated students' ability to identify the important aspects of the play and raise them to the surface. Alyssa inserted creative commentary to her comic (see fig. 3), which adds humor and another layer of critical analysis.

Virtual Literature Trips

Although Google Earth software may seem best suited for use in a geography lesson, it is easily adapted to suit learning about characters in classic literature. Google Earth assignments use technology to engage students more personally in classic literature. By virtually visiting the same places as characters did along their journey, students can develop a closer relationship. The Google Earth tool is an excellent way to support students' spatial thinking (Howland, Jonassen, and Marra). Google has numerous "Lit Trips" on classic literature works available (http://www.googlelittrips.com). Samples include *Macbeth, The Odyssey, Kite Runner,* and Elie Wiesel's *Night.*

FIGURE 3. Act Five: Catastrophe
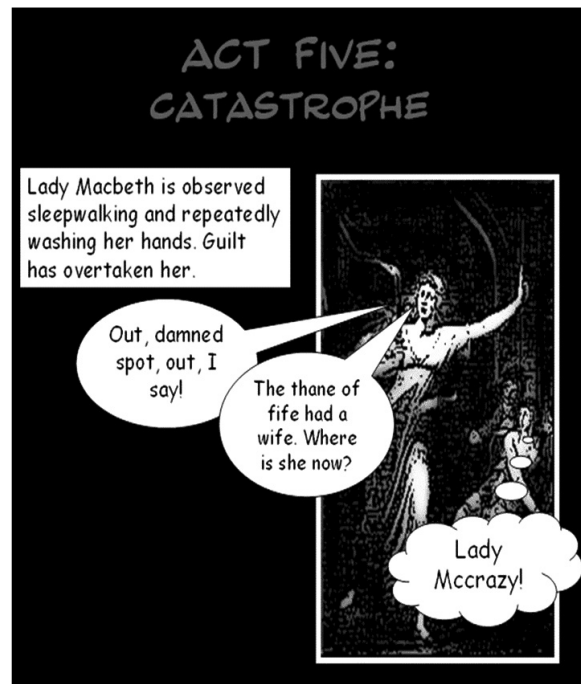
Student teachers in my class also created prototype virtual literature trips using Google Earth, incorporating locations relevant to literature taught in high schools, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Courtney Olsen's Huck Finn activity asks high school English students to complete a literature trip by tracing Huck's journey, identifying setting using Google Earth's place mark tool, and adding a brief summary of how Huck came to arrive there. Students are given directions: "Huckleberry Finn travels to many towns and cities along the Mississippi River. Though they are not all given precise names, we are given enough clues to chart the approximate course that Huck Finn took. Use the Google Earth place mark icon to plot each location." Once Huck's stops are plotted, we discover the length of his journey along the Mississippi River and better understand the strength of his character in his ability to persevere against physical odds.

Addressing Standards

The aforementioned comic book and Google Earth assignments align with Common Core State Standards for high school English Language arts.

Anchor Standards for Reading:

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

RH.11-12.6. Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

Anchor Standards for Writing:

6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Engaging Students in Character Study

Students seemingly uninterested in learning the classics can pose challenges for educators striving to ensure that students acquire needed knowledge. The materials recommended in this article are easy for teachers and students to create and can reach students in ways that traditional instruction may not. The assignments engage students in construction of knowledge associated with character study. They aim to help students become productive, critically literate citizens of our democracy by allowing them the opportunity to give voice to burdened characters such as Lady Macbeth, Daisy Buchanan, Huck Finn, and Juliet. In addition, story setting often influences characters' actions. Closer inspec-

tion of place can provide students with greater introspection about the physical obstacles faced by characters. This can help them distinguish differences between charisma and character, a distinction sometimes confused but important to note. *EJ*

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

James Bucky Carter, editor of the NCTE text *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel,* has authored "The Comic Book Show and Tell." Here, students craft comic scripts using clear, descriptive, and detailed writing that shows (illustrates) and tells (directs). After peers create an artistic interpretation of the script, students revise their original scripts. These can all be tied to classic literature, the text of their choice, or a completely original strip. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/comic-book-show-tell-921.html