

Chapter 2

Embracing the Indefinable: Expanding Comic Composition in the Secondary English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the indefinable nature of comics as an avenue for composition in secondary English classrooms. Embracing the indefinable presents an opportunity for students to express their knowledge, analysis, and interpretations without confines of alphabetic text. Students must not only consider what they want to convey, but what comic medium would most effectively suit their purpose. They must master rhetorical strategy. Comic composition is reflective of students' identities and allows for all students, regardless of fluency in English or any other possible hindrance in an English classroom, to express their learning and demonstrate and connect with course content. This chapter explores the practical use of comic-composition in the secondary English classroom, and specifically advocates for educators to expand their definitions of comics and embrace the indefinable. By removing the constraints of English from an English classroom, the authors see the potential for accessible, equitable, and culturally-responsive education for all students.

INTRODUCTION

English education is riddled with conflict.

It stands in the unique position of being an essential academic subject, tasked to handle basic literacy, writing, language, analysis, etc. It is also, by its very nature, bound to the constraints and problematic history of the English language as a tool for assimilation and exclusion. English is not accessible to all students and very little has changed about its expectations and standards, despite the world and student populations becoming increasingly diverse. This is particularly evident in English composition.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-4313-2.ch002

Within the secondary English classroom, educators must navigate this complexity, yet still enable and empower students as academic thinkers, researchers, and composers. Indeed, “English teachers are at the fulcrum of educational debate. As global curriculum expands and refocuses the challenges and possibilities of multicultural education” (Colarusso, 2010, p. 432). English teachers need to re-evaluate the subject and explore new avenues for composition.

In this chapter, I explore the inaccessibility and inequity of English, the true function of the subject, and the value of embracing multimodalities, like comics, in the classroom. In addition to utilizing comics as literature, I advocate for comic composition. Specifically, I argue that secondary English teachers should not only allow comics as a medium for composition, but embrace the ambiguity and indefinability of comics. I will provide examples of the successful use of this practice and hope to inspire educators to remove the typical, problematic, and antiquated constraints of composition in an English classroom. This is a necessary and incredibly beneficial adaptation that embraces the tenets of English composition and is accessible for all students.

The Problem With English

English in Education

In “Language Diversity and Language Policy in Educational Access and Equity,” Tollefson and Tsui (2014) refer to English as a “central gatekeeper to education” (p. 189). Access to quality education and academic success “functionally depend on language ability” (p. 189). Additionally, because classroom and testing materials are presented in English. Students who struggle with the language, for whatever reason, often find themselves labeled as “remedial” due to scores that do not actually test what they know, but whether they have the language to express what they know (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014, p. 192). As such, the ability to speak, read, and write academic English determines academic placement, academic success, test scores, and thus access to higher education. In this way, English is a central factor to educational access and equity (Tollefson & Tsui, 2014, p. 190).

This critical role of English in American education is extremely problematic and immediately places millions of students at a severe disadvantage. In “Making Americans: Schooling, diversity, and assimilation in the twenty-first century” (2018), Lash explains that over the past thirty years, “the United States has witnessed the highest rates of immigration to the country since the late nineteenth century” (p. 99). This is directly reflected in secondary classrooms around the country, where “nearly a quarter of all students...speak a language other than English at home” (p. 99). In an educational setting, the challenge of learning already-complex concepts is exacerbated when students are also attempting to learn English simultaneously (Ardasheva et al., 2015, p. 40).

In addition to students for whom English is not their first language, most classrooms have widely diverse student populations in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, neurodiversity, mental health, and more. English is not a monolith. It exists and functions in vastly different forms for vastly different purposes. Yet, English, particularly within composition, focuses entirely on a perceived “proper” use of the language. The ways that students communicate their unique experiences and perspectives of the world is entirely dismissed and ignored, as they are required to communicate in a version of English that is not accessible or familiar to them.

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