

Chapter 13

Closing the Gap: Lessons for the Study and Practice of Comics

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ABSTRACT

This chapter has a two-fold purpose. It first serves to introduce debates about the disciplinary status of comic studies in academia. It acknowledges the value that comics play by supporting the work of various disciplines and argues there are distinct benefits for establishing a proprietary disciplinary home for the study and practice of comics. The chapter highlights the relevancy of comics by enumerating four key ways the medium is employed: as a subject matter to be studied, for creative expression, as a means of disseminating information, and as a research methodology. The chapter then aims to encourage and guide educators in exploring the medium as a pedagogical device by recounting the author's experiences and lessons learned about using comics in the university classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Comics is a seasoned art form comfortably situated within currents of popular culture. Comics on campus, however, is still maturing. The study of comics is usually shuffled to a handful of academic disciplines such as literature, media studies, and communication while comics practice is typically confined to departments of art and design. Even less visible, using comics as an investigative tool emerges only sporadically in a few research projects in either the sciences or humanities. As a result of this diffusion, recognition and support for Comics Studies as a distinct academic discipline is not widely supported. This is unfortunate, given the broad audience for comics, the continual adaptation of comics in transmedia formats, and the resulting cultural impact reflected both inside and outside academia. Outside of academia, what happens in comics doesn't *stay* in comics—it spreads globally. As a high-profile, high-impact medium, Comics Studies surely warrants a distinct home within research and teaching communities.

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Despite the customary low profile of comics within academia, recent attention paid by a few established disciplines now promises to strengthen its validity. Multimodal approaches and a graphic turn in scholarship has helped to generate new perspectives, skills, and knowledge beyond those of a single academic field. Just as importantly, visual narrative has cultivated curiosity in researchers, practitioners, and students. One can witness, for instance, significant inroads being made now in the cross-pollination of Gender Studies and the study of comics. Such interdisciplinarity helps reinforce the legitimacy of comics, but also bolsters the case for bringing its assorted functions into the fold of a proprietary home. The task herein is to explore that potential.

When reviewing relevant scholarship, this chapter finds that comics typically play four key roles while operating within existing disciplines: comics as an object of study, comics as artistic expression, comics as communication, and comics as a research methodology. It acknowledges the value of interdisciplinary collaborations, but also argues for comic studies to be given a disciplinary home of its own. In some ways, this aspiration mimics the closure that occurs when gaps between different comics panels are mentally joined to make meaning for the viewer; in other words, a “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (McCloud, 1994, p. 63). Lastly, and perhaps of special interest to teachers, the chapter concludes by recounting personal experiences and lessons learned about using comics in the classroom.

BACKGROUND

There is no uniform definition of comics but there is widespread agreement that it includes a visual component which, alone or with text, serves as narrative. The medium might be a single image or include a sequence of images in multiple panels, and might take assorted forms such as cartoons, comic strips, comic books, or graphic novels. There is already a voluminous body of literature addressing definitional nuances and various manifestations and cultural traditions of comics

Without doubt, the comics form is complex and compelling, and comics creators have approached their work in a variety of ways. Comics often reflect the personal experience of the creator, their aesthetic preference, their education, and their professional training. Like artists throughout history, comics creators operate across a variety of styles, genres, and modes—from expressionism to caricature to naturalism, from autobiography to fantasy to journalism, from political satire to comedy to surrealism. It follows that scholars and students will find something within comics that appeals to their individual interests. Just as a literature scholar may investigate comics for narrative technique, literary themes or story, a historian may be compelled to study graphic narrative representations of war, public policy or social movements. Similarly, a scholar of media studies may examine comics through semiotic theory, mass production and distribution, and the cultural dissemination of new ideas. Does this engagement with literature, history, or media studies make comics innately multidisciplinary? Is there agreement with scholars who argue that true interdisciplinarity in comics scholarship requires reciprocity between disciplines? And if so, how can reciprocity be achieved if comics studies are anti-discipline and hub-less within academia?

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