The Process of Composing Comics: Writing, Thinking, & Imaging

As the bell signifies the shift and shuffle between sixth and seventh periods, students cascade in and out from room 614. Desks scrape and teenagers gossip, cajole, and complain as they adjust their mind frames from academic to socialite and (sometimes) back. A file stand near the door holds the handouts for the day which students grab on their way to their desks. Most don't even glance at first, but as the late bell rings their eyes turn to the unusual images in their hands. Like dominoes, one hushed stare brings on others as my Modern World Literature students peruse the short feature comic "Hurdles". I scan the room for reactions: one group of whispered, "oh, sweet!"; some open mouthed and flabbergasted, "what the…?"; one head ever so slightly banging on the desk and whimpering; and several accusatory glares.

"Ms. Pellerin, does this mean we're going to have to make our own comics?" I nod as Holly rattles the sheet at me. "Ugh," she grunts to Margaret, who's still letting her head thump on the desk. This was not quite the reaction I was imagining, but then again, I had no idea what reactions my students would muster at the thought of composing their own comics. The variety of attitudes and notions about comics and their value as a medium of literature became readily apparent to me that day, and although many of my students changed their opinions as the unit went on, I wasn't prepared for what hurdles we would all have to jump before the comics were completed.

* * *

When I was a teenager, I started to take a casual interest in *X-Men* comics because the television series was one of my favorite Saturday morning offerings. Simultaneously, I had become infatuated with reading the daily edition of *Calvin & Hobbes* syndicated in the Lewiston Daily Sun Journal before I left for school each morning. In fact, when the final strip Bill Watterson produced appeared on December 31st, 1995, I let a few tears slip down my cheeks. A couple years later, I met a true comic aficionado and fell in love. My comic and graphic novel infatuation was never mentioned to my fellow Literature majors, but between me and my fellow comic geeks, we reveled in our weekly and monthly acquisitions, often swallowing newly found series whole. Despite this, my teaching and my love of comics didn't mingle until my first foray into teaching graphic novels in 2006 when I rekindled the affair by exploring Art Spiegelman's *Maus* with my World Literature students.

Although graphic novels were slowly becoming more accepted as "legitimate literature"(Schwarz 59), Timberlane Regional High School had a spotty record for teaching them. A district comprised of approximately 1600 students in Southern New Hampshire, the TRHS community has a philosophical blending of the traditional and the progressive. The administration favors progressive approaches utilizing technology and collaboration to teach traditional canonized content. Thus, somehow one order of *Maus* had surreptitiously been ordered by a colleague and quietly shuffled

around classrooms in the department to avoid the nasty gaze of our fellow English teachers. A couple years later, I grew tired of the side long glances and decided to come out of the graphic novel closet. I proposed a new course to be taught called "The Graphic Novel as Literature" and wrote a curriculum that culminated in a full length student generated comic. Influenced by the National Council of Teachers of English beliefs about the teaching of writing, specifically that "students should be taught the features of different genres, experientially not only explicitly, so that they develop facilities in producing them and become familiar with variant features. If one is going to write in a genre, it is very helpful to have read in that genre first," I felt strongly that in order for students to be able to analyze and appreciate any genre or medium of writing, they must learn to compose in it (NCTE). However, upon completing my curriculum, I realized that I had no clue if composing comics really would help students to read or write any better. The only thing that remained clear to me was that "comics is a secret language all its own, and mastering it poses challenges unlike any faced by prose writers, illustrators or any other creative professionals" (McCloud 2).

During my first summer at the Plymouth Writing Project, my roommate researched the relationship between creative writing and expository writing skills. Through pursuing research written by James Britton and many others, she came to conclude that there is a positive correlation. It was my hunch that there would also be a positive correlation between composing comics and writing text-only pieces. In order to examine this phenomenon more closely, I decided to research the process students utilize when composing their own short feature comics.

I decided to conduct my study with my Modern World Literature students. The course is a senior accelerated English elective that seeks to study the current state of human rights through the lens of literature and philosophy.   This semester, I was gifted with a small class comprised of only thirteen students. Their diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds gave me an interesting but manageable sampling of students with whom to conduct my research.

I decided to set up the assignment as similarly as possible to my techniques for teaching any other medium of writing. I started with introducing mentor texts like "Hurdles" by Derek Kirk Kim, some short strips of *Calvin & Hobbes*, and some comics written in response to the 9/11 tragedy. Through examining these, we analyzed the characteristics of the genre and how the images, sequencing, and words comingle to tell a story. I then engaged the students in the writing process by guiding them through prewriting, drafting, reviewing, revision, and publishing. Early in the process, I shared a comic I had recently composed with my students, explained my process, thinking, and hurdles, and alleviated their concerns about their various drawing skills. They engaged in peer review and feedback regularly through the process and each student had a one-on-one conference with me on the second draft of their pieces. After completing their final drafts, the comics were shared with the class in a museum format

where they were displayed around the classroom. Students mingled and chatted excitedly about their comics. The next day, they turned in a short essay where they sought to describe the process of creating their comics. Both the essays and the comics were collected and analyzed as artifacts.

One of the few theorists about comic composition, Scott McCloud, writes that "comics requires us to make a constant stream of choices regarding images, pacing, dialogue, composition, gesture and a ton of other options" (9). He has categorized these choices into five elements to consider when composing comics: choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of word, and choice of flow.

The first hurdle that my students had to overcome was letting go of their preconceived notions about comics. It is perhaps a common misconception that students will hungrily and immediately accept comics and graphic novels into their imaginations. At least at TRHS, graphic novels and comics are so rarely a component of the classroom that many students do not believe them to be worthy of study as serious or legitimate literature. Although educators and scholars like Glen Bledsoe "note that, despite their reputation, comics aren't necessarily easy reading, but rather a multimodal experience that combines images, captions, and dialogue in layers that the reader must link together to construct meaning on multiple levels" (Faulker). Nay-sayers relegate comics to children's fare or to insipid eye-candy, and perhaps that attitude has silently permeated through to our students. None of the thirteen students with whom I conducted this study had ever been asked to compose a comic before. Two students, among them Vallerie, expressed excitement at the novelty and challenge the task presented them, but even those who were familiar with comics had much more rudimentary beliefs about them:

> "I was incredibly excited when I found out that we were going to be able to draw comics in class. My only experience with drawing comics comes from me sitting in the back of my eight period geometry class believing that the cartoon character falling off a cliff was going through a lot less pain than I was. What I did not realize was all of the thought and planning that goes into a comic."

The other twelve students, however expressed total unfamiliarity with comics. Molly explained,

> "I am completely unknowledgeable about comics so I hope that I did the genre justice….this whole project I was completely out of my element. I was given a project in an area that I know next to nothing about. Most of the time when I am given a project in class I know something about the subject or I have done that type of project before. I've always had some familiarity. But for this I had none and I believe that is why I struggled so much and threw out so many pieces of paper."

Two students had outright prejudice against comics. Holly describes her initial beliefs of comics:

> "When we were first assigned the project, I was instantly irritated…it annoyed me. To me, comics have always been an excuse for people to not read real books. I am sure that a lot of that came from my mother and I being librarians; I have always wanted to see more children reading because I think that people don't read enough anymore…however comics fill up most of their page space with pictures instead of words, so the reader never gets the same benefits as reading a full novel."

Although this exhibits a range of initial feelings, these feelings unfortunately created instant roadblocks that had to be circumvented before the students were able to move forward with their composing process. These students were all generally ambitious and well-achieving students, but they acted like struggling writers during the first phase of the project: procrastinating, complaining, making false starts, and even completely giving up. This is most likely an apt comparison because the unfamiliarity with the medium caused a lot of tension with the students whom felt that they had little to no background knowledge upon which to build their own composition processes. Although the introduction of mentor texts helped to alleviate some of the attitude that comics could not be legitimate literature, the majority of the resistance came from the students' fresh take on a project of this nature. Because none had done this before, it was alien, foreign, and something to be muddled through rather than refined like writings the likes of which they had grown accustomed. The actual act of struggling through the process, however, came to be the most profound experience for many of the students. Vega and Schnackenberg explain that "when individuals design or create things that are meaningful to them…some of the most powerful learning occurs" (818). Of the thirteen students in the study, eleven expressed similar feelings as Emily who explained it well when she wrote,

> "Overall I'm very happy we were given this assignment…it was a change that I didn't like at first but I began to realize that it was something that I enjoyed doing and helped me get a feel for what comics really were. I see comics now as so much more than a funny cartoon but instead have the ability to symbolize a much bigger point. I give people who write comics for a job so much more credit because they take so much time and thought."

This feeling was mirrored by Holly who wrote,

> "…in doing this project, I have come to realize that sometimes even I have prejudices that can hold me back, and that is something I have never considered before. I preach open-mindedness, but it seems that even I have preconceived notions that need shattering. In the end, it turned out that I loved my comic the same way that I love any art piece I create…it is strange that I put up the roadblocks that originally made it so difficult."

Although certainly not all the students expressed a complete love of comics in the end, the most revolutionary thinking was that they decided to give comics a second chance at being literature, and themselves a first chance as composers of comics as literature.

Once this initial hurdle was navigated, the students were ready to get down to the business of composing their comics. First came the process of planning their comics which includes searching for an idea and deciding how to represent that idea in comic form. For many students, this was a considerable hurdle to overcome and seemed to take the bulk of their time. The nature of the assignment asked students to represent a philosophical idea in comic form. It did not have to be a formal movement of philosophy like Existentialism or Humanism, but had to question the nature of humanity and/or the cosmos. Although this project served as the capstone for a unit introducing philosophy, many students continued to struggle with this idea. Holly wrote, "…the next challenge was developing a philosophical base because I was still struggling with what it meant to be philosophical. It took a lot of discussing in class for me to understand it." If total free choice of topic had been given, I'm not sure this would have been a problem. After this, students wrote extensively about their inspiration process. Kate said:

> "When I started trying to think of ideas for my comic, I had my mind set on the philosophical idea that there are no guarantees made by leading a life according to reason or god. That gave me the idea for a layout of my comic…I just couldn't think of a good plot. When I got home, I was talking to my younger sister about the assignment and for some reason, talking about it helped me have a light bulb moment….I got all excited and started writing ideas down like lightening."

And Erin explained:

> "I had no idea what philosophical idea I wanted to use. Once I got an idea on what idea to use, I didn't know how to get the point across in a visual way…When I first thought of my idea, it was because that morning my mom said to me, "it is what it is". Right when she said that, I knew that was where my inspiration was going to come from and I built off of that. I came up with a story line only a couple of minutes before class started but I felt good about it."

A variety of inspiration techniques were utilized, but generally, students started with an overarching theme that they wished to represent and then examined the notions of plot as a means of conveyance. Students seemed to naturally operate along the same lines as creative writing with storyline development perhaps because this was the closest skill set they could rely on, but I think also because comics are natural conduits for telling stories. The structure of panels also "cultivates the mapping of ideas in cause and effect connections" according to Donald Jackson. Also he explains that,

> "The passage of time is one of the distinguishing elements in sequential art. Whether it feels compressed or expanded, sequential art has a way of creating a different sense of time that overrides our sense of real time. While singular works of art can be said to have a narrative, sequential art is inseparable from the aspect of narrative because of it's cause and effect relation to time and space illustrated within the sequence of panels" (3-4).

Thus, it seems that the very nature of comics encourages students to consider story elements of plot, time, and sequence in their planning.

After the initial planning stages were conceptualized, next, students immediately began to consider the images that would relay their ideas. With the exception of one student, all the composers thought about the images as a function of their plot. Kate's comic relied almost completely on the parallel structure of images she laid out: "I set the panels up that one person's life would be shown in the top half of the panel and another person's life would be shown on the bottom." Sarah M.'s comic utilized images that completely hinged the storyline:

> "My comic stretched ten panels long and no two panels in a row were viewed from the same perspective. There were different angles shown so that the scene could really be examined. I focused on the drawing first, rather than dialogue. I found it easier to sketch a plot rather than to focus on creating the right dialogue…most of the comic takes place in the rain, but the sun slowly comes out just as the man enters the girl's life. The girl and her dog are first illustrated as stick figures because they are incomplete. When the girl meets the man and the dogs meet, she becomes whole and complete. Similar to that, each panel has more color as the story continues…I decided to add the panel of the dog's perspective. The dog saw another dog in the distance and the next scene is the leash snapping. This panel was the key panel that suggested that everything happens for a reason."

The images seemed to dictate many of the aesthetic and editorial decisions that the students made. Some students elected to compose in stick figures because they were unconfident in their drawing abilities, but even those comics clearly illustrated the purpose and message. Some even adjusted their story to reflect the stick figures as symbolic; Molly wrote,

> "There was a lot of scraping for the drawings…my other issue that I had seemed to be the fact that I'm not a drawer…so the way I worked around that was through the method of stick figures. There is also symbolism in the stick figures, their simplicity means something. But it was the easiest way that I could think of to express what I was trying to convey."

Holly felt completely handicapped by her drawing ability, so she turned to technology to help her.

> "I began to question how much I could portray through just images…I knew exactly what I wanted the panels to look like, but I could not figure out how to draw the complicated things…then when you told us about Comic Life, I got excited. I figured that using clipart and images from the computer, I could really portray what I wanted to."

Comic Life is a user-friendly software program that gives students drag-and-drop and templates to support their composing process. For Holly, this was a crucial turning point in her composing process. Thus, I think it is important to allow students flexibility in the manner of composing that they feel comfortable with—if I had forced her to hand draw, I don't think she would have completed the assignment at all.

One student continued to have difficulty with understanding the marriage of text and images that characterize comics. It was a considerable challenge for her to see the images as more than an illustration of her text. Sarah C. wrote:

> "I found myself having a hard time illustrating my text. I think I was feeling that as long as the viewer got the message I did it right… I really couldn't illustrate my text. I had the idea that my illustrations were my weak point going into the conference but it was helpful to know the text held potential. I do feel that I eventually reached my goal though after much revision of these pictures. Although I wish I could have come around to making the illustrations the focus I know that I did my best to support the text."

This again illustrates the student's unfamiliarity with comics as a genre. Her consistent reference to her illustrations as a support for the text clearly indicates that she has not yet had a shift in her thinking from text-only writing to comics. She later explains, "I figured I'd be more apt to start with the visuals, then build the text off of that. But for my comic *Clocks* it was a very 'text driven' piece." Her metacognition here makes me feel confident that more explicit teaching and more exposure to the medium would support this student in making the leap from illustrated text to comic. The images in comics are not necessarily the star of the show, although sometimes comics appear totally wordless, generally "a comic writer has to decide what the image will be and how the image will be created…The fun part is deciding how much the images will convey and how much the text will convey… the challenge is to find the best image and add just enough words for it to make sense" explains Bledsoe. McCloud contends that "in comics, the two have to work together seamlessly enough that readers barely notice when switching from one to another" (31). So, even though comic scholars still disagree about which should play the leading role, the text and words must become an indelible team.

Which leads into the next step of the process: considering words. Many students gave words a tertiary role in their comics, but they all considered the weight of words carefully in their composition process. For example, Sarah M. wrote "the next step was to add dialogue. I decided not to focus a lot on dialogue because I didn't want to take away from the pictures." Similarly, Marina didn't begin to consider the words in her comic until our conference when she thought "on what to add for the dialog. Up until then I hadn't thought about what dialog to add I just knew that I needed some…the dialog I added helps to explain the characters thoughts." This shows that the students were primarily imagistic in their planning stages, but that as they went through the process, they began to use words to express their themes. Scott McCloud refers to the relationship as "words and pictures can combine to create effects that neither could create separately" (4).

One student decided to attempt a completely wordless comic. His piece "Do Not Create What You Can't Destroy" was a meditation on how technology has progressed as a weapon against mankind. The panels progressed through the ages showing

technology transform from tools to weapons and included images of knives, planes, and bombs. These images did not necessarily create a plot line, but instead built a foundation for his horrific apocalyptic future depicted in the final panel where robots take over the world and decimate humanity. Of his decision not to include words, Greg wrote,

> "I also wanted to really make it a point to not use any words whatsoever in the comic strip. I suppose I could have added a word or two on maybe one or two of the frames, but I thought that only having one or two words would make it my comic strip less unique. I did add a few sound effect words in the last strip to represent explosions; however I don't really consider those to be critical words in order for you to understand what's going on."

Although Greg was the only student whose comic didn't display a plot line, his message remained very clear and the images certainly sequenced together to depict the theme he selected. An interesting observation made in my teaching journal raises some questions about this:

> "I was also very surprised by the number of students who dove in head first with a wordless comic. This might be an expression of their confusion about how text and images work together in a comic to create the meaning. I probably could've done more explicit teaching with this rather than just relying on the mentor texts to illustrate this. Actually, now that I think of it, I noticed that one of the students who did a wordless comic--Greg-- read a wordless comic as his mentor text. Perhaps I should have used more than one text per student to illustrate a wider variety of options."

This shows that there is probably a correlation between the mentor texts and the products. Although the wordless comic is not the only one Greg was exposed to, it challenged him to think about comics in a different way. Initially he had a very difficult time interpreting the mentor comic, but it seems to have left a lasting impression upon him.

Another hurdle that the students and I both had to overcome was the idea of drafting and revision. When I piloted this assignment with myself, I agonized over how to complete multiple drafts of the piece. Because of the images and layout, I decided not to draw at all on my drafts until the final piece, relying instead on outlines, page maps, and dialogue/narration scripts. Some of my students decided to draw for their initial drafts and others did not. Of all the pieces of the process I discerned from this study, this one was the hardest to peg down because of the vast and unique approaches my students took for this step. Molly described that through drafting, the story started to get away from her:

> "For this paper I went through a lot of drafts…as well as a lot of struggle to find a theme. In the end I just went back to doing the original theme which was based off of a Post Secret postcard…as I was writing my outline the plotline started taking a life of its own. I started to get several ideas for what I would do at once so they all seemed to get incorporated in some way."

Instead of discarding some of her ideas, she decided to try and incorporate them all. A similar thing happened with Margaret as she developed her piece:

> "…then it evolved into the girl finding her wonderland, her escape from the sadness of the rain. I got other opinions of which ending I should use, but I liked them both so much that I ended up combining them."

For both of these students, the generation of ideas became the dominant force and editing down their choices became less important. I believe this may be due to the relative excitement the students had for the project at this point. Because they had not been given this kind of assignment before, they perhaps felt that they needed to "get it all out" in one piece based on the (probably safe) assumption that they may not be asked to compose in this medium again. Alternatively, this may also be a manifestation of their general writing skills where both of these student writers often struggle with focus in their text-only writing.

Several students felt themselves deviating from their original plan during the revision process. Kate wrote "my storyline didn't necessarily end up pertaining to a life led according to reason" which was her original concept. Sarah C. "started a new comic for (her) changed philosophy which ended up being (her) final draft". Both of these experiences reflect a common occurrence in composing text-only pieces whereby the writer comes to clarify and reorganize their thinking during the process of drafting and revision.

Finally, students expressed keen attention to the details and symbols they wished to incorporate into their pieces. Many explained that this became the final step of their process, like Marina who said, "for my final draft, I made the pictures more detailed…" and Sarah M. who wrote, "I continued to add more detail to each panel to emphasize archetypes and foreshadowing". For some, like Vallerie, the addition of details become more foundational as she worked: "Analyzing my work and adding in more details, I found that I understood the blanket theory more clearly…books and comics, like a legal document, have important details down to the last drop of ink." For her, this lead to an epiphany that changed her thinking about literature. She wrote:

> "I always found it easy to analyze laws, court cases, or the constitution, but I never could analyze other forms of literature. With law, I can always find multiple angles, loopholes, connections, or just look at a case without emotion. Now I realize that I can apply that to other forms of literature that I read. I figured out an easier way for me to analyze literature instead of approaching it one way…Now I can apply my analyzing skills to literature."

For another student, the details were the focus from the beginning. The detail of a sunflower operated like a repetend or motif in her comic that deepened her meaning:

> "I also tried to hade a different sense of symbolism within the piece. I have always been a huge fan of sunflowers and to me they symbolize life and happiness. I started out my comic with a girl holding a sunflower and petals falling off onto the ground. I had the petals represent time and them falling to

the ground as a symbol of past years and how time was going by, and how everyone is living by a moment. My last few sections I had the sunflowers in the glass represent possibilities for the future…I finished out the piece by drawing out a family portrait and each family member was holding a sunflower to show all the new possibilities that come with having your own family and living your own life."

Emily built her entire comic around a symbol which at least to her, encapsulated much of the message she was trying to convey.

Through examining the stages in this process, it became abundantly clear to me that differentiating the stages was challenging. While analyzing my data, it was not easy to classify what the students explained into neat and easily defined parameters. This leads me to believe that the process is extremely recursive. McCloud explains of his five choice that "these aren't 'steps' that have to be taken in some predetermine order. Most comics artists juggle all five as needed" (37). For example, in the following passage, Marina describes the process of completing her first draft, but the stages of planning, considering images, and drafting were all completed simultaneously:

"I finally decided on "human drama" from I Heart Huckabees and drew a rough draft. After my rough draft was finished I read it over a couple of times. Half-way through my comic I would have to go back to the beginning to recall what ideas I was trying to imply. I did this more than once and then I decided to write all my ideas on the back so I wouldn't get confused. This helped a lot and each time I read the notes over I thinned out the meaning so that it made the most possible sense…this problem (being confused about my meaning) helped me organize the ideas in my mind and piece them together so that I could better understand my own topic. I unscrambled the mass of ideas and my comic now made sense to me… The conference helped me because I was able to explain my ideas out loud and once again organize them in my mind. …"

Similar to the writing process, the ideas solidified and evolved as the composing continued. In order to draw a comparison between this phenomenon and artistic composition, I interviewed one of my sophomore students who is an aspiring illustrator. Adam explained that his process in creating a drawing is very organic. He often doesn't know what he is drawing until it is partially finished. Even then,

"it can completely change like as I'm drawing it. Even with this (referring to an illustration on the desk), I had no clue it was going to be a dragon at the time. I was just kind of drawing. I mean it could have been a lizard, a dog, even a wolf, but I just decided to make it into a dragon, I mean as I was just kinda drawing stuff. Usually by the time I finish the head or sometimes I didn't draw a head, but if I'm drawing like a full bodied figure, usually by the time I draw the head, I know what I'm doing."

These similarities further indicate that the composition for comics is a hybrid of the artistic and writing processes.

Now that our sprint through comics composition was complete, we broke the finish line tape with a classroom sharing of students' comics. I had mentioned to them casually that other people would see their comics, and I had anticipated some hesitation or unwillingness to share, but students surprised me with their excitement that day. We spent the entire 45 minutes quietly and then conversationally sharing their work in a museum style activity. When the bell rang for class to end, there were audible groans. Later, when I read the students' essays that accompanied their comics, I saw that audience took a major role in their composition. It seemed as though the students just *knew* that comics demanded viewing. For Greg, the sense of audience was evident even in the planning stages of his work:

> "My biggest challenge… was trying to come up with a topic that would be interesting for me as well as the reader…At first I thought, maybe something having to do with the current presidency, however I think that may have caused a classroom debate in which I would want to have no part of. In any instance, I would have chosen some sort of problem that relates to the world that we live in today, because I wanted the reader to be able to relate to what I was talking about."

The reaction of his audience was so significant to him that he altered his original topic. Although he was the only student in the study who wrote about this degree of audience awareness, reader clarity was a high priority for many of these students. Nearly all the students wrote about their concerns, so here is a sampling:

> - "I hopefully didn't confuse the reader."
> - "I wanted my comic to be a great one. I didn't want it to be put together at the last minute and to be sloppy….I am just worried about if it will make sense to others."
> - "I knew from the beginning I wanted my comic to be clear to the reader where they would be able to interpret the meaning of it by the last picture….and it's something that as a reader you can relate to…"
> - "Generally, I think the hardest part of creating my comic that illustrates a philosophical idea, was strengthening the comic so that I was sure the viewer would understand."

This powerful sense of an authentic audience is one that I have never encountered before—even with my creative writing courses and units. Certainly I have never had a student exclaim to a friend, "hey look at this sweet analysis of Shakespeare I wrote!", but the enthusiasm for the comics was a happy surprise. Kate explained that once she finished her comic,

> "I brought the final draft to school and showed it to some of my friends. I was wicked excited to see their reactions because I was so proud of my little masterpiece…I thought it was interesting how some people read it and interpreted it very differently. Some people got the message that I thought I made clear…I really enjoyed getting feedback from the class and reviewing their

interpretations of my comic because they were all correct, they just saw it differently."

This stance is reminiscent of an author in that not only does she seek feedback from others, but she also accepts alternative interpretations as valid. On the other end of the spectrum was Margaret who unabashedly wrote her comic for an audience of one: herself. She explains, "This comic may not make very much sense to very many people but I'm finding more and more that it is my life." Clarity for external audiences was never a concern of hers, only that she got a chance to put her inner turmoil to the page. The comic, a meditation on her relationship with her mother, was not a memoir, but a fictionalized reimagining of her own subconscious fears and sensibilities.

Over the course of this study, I have come to understand that the comics composition process is not wholly unlike the writing process. The student composers experienced a recursive process that included planning, drafting, and revising. They considered their words and images and formatted their pieces to meet their purposes. In the end, they exhibited qualities of authors when they considered audience, message, and the polysemous nature of their own work. I can most liken the reading and writing of comics to that of poetry. Poetry has its own conventions, but they serve more as a starting point than a restriction. So too are comics where the conventions are being broken for stylistic purposes. In poetry, students must utilize a different skill set to read and unwrap the often elusive nature of poems. In comics, students must utilize visual literacy as well as critical and creative thinking to unpack comics. So too is the similarity with composing poetry and comics. Poets must craft images (through words) that will convey their message; poets also practice conciseness with selecting words—trying to get as much meaning from as little text as possible. Poets experiment with the passage of time by manipulating line, stanza, and canto where cartoonists manipulate panel, spread, and sequence. Poetry and comics both pay homage to the telling quality of well placed details. Poetry is often considered the pinnacle of literary writing, while the humble comic begs for recognition beyond the magazine rack.

Although the effect of writing comics has not yet been fully studied, it is clear to me that there must be some merit in the act of cartooning. One study conducted by Michael Bitz found of students who participated in the creation of an eight-page comic book, "86% of them believed that the experiment helped their writing ability. Even more impressively, 90% of the instructors reported that they thought the students' writing had improved after participating in the project" (qtd. in Duncan and Smith 278). Despite this, there is a general lack of formal theory relating to the composition of comics and their effect. Schwarz explains that "one of the challenges for those who wish to use the graphic novel in the classroom will be the search for new theory, new terms, and new ideas that will help all to analyze, evaluate, and create this medium." Although it is a new medium to the academic world, that does not mean it should go unstudied. The lack of formal theory only means that comics remain an uncharted territory, one which calls to be studied for its exciting potential to engage students in a

composition process unlike any other. A lot of work has been done examining the reading of comics and graphic novels and now it is time to turn the tide to the creative composing side as well.

In order for this to be done, educators have to consider the medium not for what it has been in the past, but what potential it has to create meaning for our students. Much of the negative feelings about comics as literature comes from a lack of exposure to great representative pieces; it would be like expecting someone to believe in the power of poetry even though they had only read Hallmark cards as examples. To continue to make comics a legitamate medium of literature, more demystification and exposure to quality pieces in classrooms needs to occur. Everything we do in our classrooms and schools sends a message. In turn, everything we don't do sends a message as well. By quietly excluding any medium, the message is that the form if not worthy of study and consideration. Thus, for comics to be promoted from the muck and mire of the literary world, graphic novels and comics need to be given some status in the classroom by allowing and encouraging students to read, write, and discuss them along with the other mediums of literature that we have cultivated all along.

Works Cited

Duncan, Randy, and Matthew J. Smith. *The Power of Comics*. New York: Continuum International Group, 2009. Print. *A textbook about the history, form and culture of comics. Of particular interest, a chapter of researching comics.*

Faulkner, Grant. "Digital Comics Spur Students' Interest in Writing - National Writing Project." *National Writing Project - Improving the Teaching of Writing in the Nation's Schools*. National Writing Project, 29 Jan. 2009. Web. 04 Oct. 2009. <http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2811>. *Literacy skills "augmented by...decisions that writers make".*

Jackson, Donald. "Cognitive Comics: A Constructivist Approach to Sequential Art." Thesis. State University of New York College at Buffalo, 2009. *Cognitive Comics*. Cognitive Comics, 2009. Web. 4 Oct. 2009. <http://cognitivecomics.webs.com/>. *Downloaded grant research paper.*

Mccloud, Scott. *Making Comics Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2006. Print. *Two chapters of paticular interest: "Writing with Pictures" and "the Power of Words".*

Morrison, Timothy G., Gretogy Bryan, and George W. Chilcoat. "Using Student-generated Comic Books in the Classroom." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 45.8 (2002): 758-67. Print. *Lists skills used to compose in comics.*

Schwarz, Gretchen. "Expaniding Literacies through Graphic Novels." *English Journal* 95.6 (2006): 58-64. Print. *Article focuses on using GN's for multiple literacies--reading skills.*

Schwarz, Gretchen. "Media Literacy, Graphic Novels and Social Issues." *Simile* 7.4 (2007): 1-11. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 18 July 2009.

Vega, Edwin S., and Heidi L. Schnackenberg. *Integrating Technology, Art, and Writing: Creating Comic Books as an Interdisciplinary Learning Experience*. Rep. Chicago: Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2004. ERIC document reproduction service no. ED485026. *ERIC*. Web. 4 Oct. 2009. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED485026&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED485026>. *Brief description of academic skills needed for creating comics.*

Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee. "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing." *National Council of Teachers of English*. Nov. 2004. Web. 21 Nov. 2009. <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs>.