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Creating Comics Fosters Reading, Writing, and Creativity

By Bill Zimmerman

WANT your students to develop their imaginations, as well as a fondness for reading, writing, and telling stories? Then encourage them to create their own comic strips.

My love of comics and understanding of their value as a learning tool began when I was a child. Back then, the best day of the week was Sunday mornings when my dad left home early to bring back an arm load of newspapers, all with their glorious color comics sections.

The funnies were my paradise. I'd spend the morning going over each strip, following the adven-

tures of my favorite characters, even flying in the sky with them. I'd look at the dazzling illustrations, be drawn into their colorful worlds, and be challenged to decipher the letters in the white balloons coming from the characters' mouths or floating above their heads. And with help from my father, I'd try my best to sound out the words in the talk balloons and make sense of the stories they told.

Comic strips provide the perfect vehicle for learning and practicing language. Each strip's three or four panels provide a finite, accessible world in which funny,

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interesting-looking characters live and go about their lives. Children with limited reading skills are not as overwhelmed when dealing with the size of a comic strip as they may be with a book of many pages. Comic strips don't require long sentences or paragraphs to tell a good story. Only a few words are required for the characters to go about their lives and reveal their stories. Anyone who sees a blank talk or thought balloon floating

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Comics can be used to teach children how to read and think imaginatively. The comic characters can become their friends and family and open up new worlds to them. Kids begin to realize that reading can be fun. By giving them a choice of fun animal and human characters with different emotions—happy, sad, angry, worried—as well as blank thought and talk balloons to fill in with their

written words and some story prompts to spark ideas, youngsters will be able to tap into their creativity to tell and create their own graphic stories.

Creating comic strips encourages youngsters to practice language, reading, writing, and communication skills. They can also be an invaluable tool when teaching English as a second language to young and old alike.

For example, a teacher could put together a comic strip with characters and blank thought or talk balloons, print it out, and ask students to fill in the balloons with words and narration. Or have students choose their own characters and develop stories alone or with a partner. Educational therapists working with deaf, learning disabled, and autistic youngsters, as well as trauma victims, also use comic strips to help their clients understand concepts and to communicate.

Comic strips are a great way for children to practice new vocabulary words and dialogue in different situations. For example, a student who may be having trouble with another student at school can use a comic to come up with words and actions to help him deal with this problem. In effect, the comic characters can serve as surrogates for children to work out different problems. And, by creating comic strips together, teachers and students learn to work and commu-

Suggested Comic Strip Themes

- You have three wishes. What are they?
- Pretend you planted your dreams. What would you grow?
- With the snap of your fingers you could change yourself. Who or what would you become?
- Someone gives you a golden treasure box. What would you place in it?
- Imagine you could talk with a character from a favorite book. Who would that be? What would you talk about?
- You are given a favorite animal characteristic. What animal would you choose? What animal trait would you like to have?
- Your meal can consist only of flowers. What would you have for dinner?
- Create a new season different from those we know. What would your season be like? What would you call it?
- Your main character writes a poem or sings a song.
- Throw a big party. Where would it be? What is the theme? Who would you invite?
- Your characters are given the power to be bold and brave for one day? What great deeds would they do?
- Your character passes a message to another, and that character passes the message on to another, and so on. How would the original message change?

nicate more effectively with each other to create something new and imaginative.

A child reading a short story could also storyboard it in comic strip form, or further develop the story after it ends. A comic can also be the beginning of a much longer story. For instance, students can make believe that animal characters can talk to each other or read each other's thoughts. Or, tell a love story. How about a comic

strip retelling a favorite fairy tale?

After creating their comics, students can print out and color them, or even e-mail them to friends or relatives. They can also use the comic strip to create personalized greeting cards and to celebrate special times in their lives. When creating their own comic strips, children can practice language skills, express their feelings and imaginations, and have fun as well!

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