

*So You Want to Be a Superhero?*

How The Art of Making Comics in an Afterschool Setting Develops Young People's Creativity, Literacy, and Identity<sup>1</sup>

by Sarita Khurana

**INTRODUCTION**

One day while visiting a local bookstore, I walked past an aisle of graphic novels, how-to-draw books, and comic collections. To my surprise, I observed a group of teenagers sitting on the floor or leaning against the bookshelves, their backpacks in disarray on the floor. What were all these young people doing at 3:30 in the afternoon on a beautiful spring weekday in New York City? They were reading. This may come as a shock to those who believe the myth that young people don't like to read—certainly not outside of required school reading, certainly not after school when they could be playing basketball or video games. These young people were reading comics, a whole genre of reading material that fascinates and engages many young people.

When people think of comics, they imagine superheroes in colorful costumes fighting dastardly villains, cats chasing mice, or cuddly bunnies. Comics have been defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9). By that definition, the epic story contained in a pre-Columbian picture manuscript telling of the great Mixtec military and political hero, Eight Deer Tiger's Claw, would qualify as a comic. The Bayeux Tapestry, a 230-foot tapestry detailing the Norman conquest of England in 1066, as well as Egyptian paintings, Trajan's Column, Greek urn paintings, and Japanese scrolls, would also qualify as comics. To that illustrious history, I would add comic art, one of the most popular storytelling media around the globe. From classic American comic strips to Japanese *Manga*, comics cover subjects ranging from humorous teen angst to social commentary.

Many afterschool programs have chosen to align themselves with youth culture, promoting activities to which young people are drawn, such as hip-hop dance, photography, fashion clubs, and soccer. To that list we can add classes on comic-making. Older youth, in particular, vote with their feet when it comes to regular participation in afterschool programs. Yet they are naturally drawn to comic-making, excited to have a chance to draw their own characters and develop their own stories. After all, they've been reading comics for a long time, sometimes starting with newspaper comic strips, and they've been familiar with animated characters since they were introduced to Saturday morning cartoons and video games.

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This chapter will describe a comic-making class offered at the Educational Alliance in New York City. In this class, comics are taken seriously both as reading material and as an art medium. This chapter will demonstrate how participants are engaged in learning not only the craft of comic production—including storyline development, character profiles, sequential storytelling, and illustration—but also many of the skills that support academic outcome, particularly language arts. In addition, the chapter will show how this endeavor is grounded in positive youth development, and can help youth explore and establish their own individual and collective identities.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

There is a growing body of research on the use of popular and youth culture, such as comics and the internet (including sometimes controversial websites as myspace.com), as a source of literacy development and identity exploration for older youth (Alvermann, D., 2002, Bitz, M., 2006, Hull, 2006, Schultz, Brockenbrough, & Dhillon, 2005). This work has examined how young people’s use of cultural tools reveals their view of the world and their values. In addition, the research is examining how the use of cultural tools provides opportunities for growth as readers and writers.

In her work on children’s use of media and popular cultural symbols, Anne Dyson writes, “[C]hildren may position themselves within stories that reveal dominant ideological assumptions about categories of individuals and the relations between them—boys and girls, adults and children, rich people and poor, people of varied heritages, physical demeanors, and societal powers” (Dyson, 1996, p. 472). In his book on the art of cartoons, McCloud (1993) explains, “entering the world of the cartoon, you see yourself... through factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and childlike features of characters” (McCloud, 1993, p. 57). The cartoon “is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it...” (McCloud, 1993, p. 57).

Additional research on the development of multiple literacies is showing that people acquire literacy through a range of opportunities and multiple points of entry, many of which do not occur during school time (G. Hull & K. Schultz, 2002). The afterschool time is an important space where this can go on because it has traditionally allowed opportunities for creative and artistic exploration, unhindered by a narrow focus on an academic curriculum or upon grade achievement. Shirley Brice Heath (2001) writes, “For some children and youth [afterschool programming] fosters a sense of self-worth and a host of talents—particularly linguistic and creative—that classrooms neither have the time nor legal permission to foster” (Heath, S. B., 2001, p. 10).

## **PROGRAM CONTEXT & DESIGN**

The Educational Alliance, an old settlement house in the Lower East Side of New York City, serves children and families, providing such services as Head Start, afterschool programs, and mental health programs. School of the Future, a public middle

and high school in Manhattan has partnered with the Alliance for the past seven years, where the Alliance provides a daily afterschool program. The partnership with School of the Future is like several others with schools across New York City, supporting and complementing the school day by providing young people with enrichment opportunities they do not usually get in school. The Alliance has received most of its funding for the program from public sources including New York State's Office of Children & Family Services, The After School Corporation, and, most recently, the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development.

Students at School of the Future are sixth to twelfth graders drawn from neighborhoods all over the city—a diverse mix of African-American, Latino, Asian, and white students. Of the 550 students enrolled in the school, approximately 300 are part of the daily afterschool program, which runs from Monday – Friday, 3-6pm. Of course, some students attend the program because their parents need a place for them to be after school while they are at work, but many attend the program because they like what's offered: arts, technology, sports, academics, and recreation. Students select their own afterschool classes each semester and receive elective school credit for regularly participating in and completing the classes. This credit helps build connections with the school day and provides recognition of the learning students do after school. All the classes use an approach called project-based learning; whose final products includes performances, writing, and visual art displays.

The afterschool program is run by a full-time site-based director, who is employed by the Educational Alliance and supervises about 40 part-time staff and volunteers. Each day students who stay for the afterschool program transition from their school day into the afterschool snack period, followed by 45 minutes of quiet time for homework and other school assignments. Once homework hour ends, students move into their afterschool classes. Classrooms used for 8<sup>th</sup> grade English and Math during the day are now used for robotics, yoga, and comics in the afternoon.

The afterschool comics class was started at School of the Future in the Fall of 2001, and has been a regular offering since then. To find instructors, the Program Director, Mitzi Sinnott, posted advertisements on Craig's List on the internet and sent emails to local art schools and comic book houses like Marvel and DC Comics in New York City. Through a contact at DC Comics, she found Alex Simmons, who, at the time of this writing, has been working in the afterschool setting for the past six years. His background is in the comics industry; he spent many years producing and writing his own work, *BlackJack*, a story about an African-American soldier of fortune set in Tokyo in the mid-1930s. Alex and I spent quite a bit of time talking about his class and the comics industry in general. As an African-American man, he is a veteran of difficult race and class dynamics of the comics industry. Of the many afterschool educators/teaching artists that I know, Alex is one of the best. He deeply cares about his students and is extremely knowledgeable and passionate about his medium.

During the spring 2004 semester, there were 15 students in the comics class, about two-thirds from the middle school, and the rest from the high school. As many girls

were enrolled in the class as boys; about half of the students were new to class, while the rest were re-enrolled for at least a second semester.

### *Program Activities*

A typical day in the comics class begins with a lot of chatter. Several students are already in the classroom before 3 p.m., pulling out their sketchpads and notebooks, as the rest of the students filter in from snack time. On one particular day, Hillary and Wynonah, two middle-school girls, already seated next to each other, are busily updating each other on what's happened in their comic stories since last week's class: Wynonah's animal characters in her cartoon "Hamsterville" have run away from home and arrived in New York City; Hillary is still working on her sketch of her main character, Gladiator Girl. Most of the students sit in twos and threes, working and talking even before Alex has officially started the three-hour class. Others sit by themselves, usually wearing headphones, working in their own musical space. Someone always brings in a new comic book to show or has a story to tell about their character's latest adventure.

Like any other written medium, comic book storytelling has its own conventions. Students begin by learning the basic elements of the page: panel, thought-bubble, speech balloon, caption box. Other basics are visual rather than word-based: drawing the human body, learning perspective. Ultimately, students learn how to use both images and words to construct complex stories.

Since not all students have drawing skills, the first fifteen minutes of class is usually an exercise in one-minute sketching. Two students volunteer to be models, while the rest tell them how to pose. For instance, when Wynonah and Hassan volunteered, the rest of the class called out action poses: "You guys have to act like... Hassan is riding a horse, and Wynonah, you're on the floor in pain." "OK, both of you pretend you're doing a *Matrix* pose like jumping between buildings." Then they switch to two new volunteers: "OK, Jake, you're dancing, and Mia, you're sitting in a yoga pose near his feet." "Jake, you lie down, and Mia, you stand up and pretend you're going to kick him in the stomach." (Class exercise, February 10, 2004) These exercises get students to see the world from different angles and help them with their drawing styles. Students work on basic drawing techniques such as line, shape, color, and perspective. They can have their classmates pose in stances that occur in their storyline, so they can practice drawing something that is relevant to their work. Sometimes Alex asks the students to make a one-minute sketch into a comic strip, so that the drawing practice becomes an exercise in sequential storytelling.

When sketching time is over, students get down to work on their projects. New students begin with three- or four-panel comic strips like those in newspapers. Even a three-panel strip requires a storyline; it has to have a beginning, middle, and end. Students need to think about elements of story structure: What is the genre—science fiction, adventure, fantasy? Who are the characters? What is the mood—humorous, serious, or suspenseful? What is the point of the story? What are the first and last shots the audience will see, and what's in the middle? Sal's first four-panel comic strip about

Electro Magnetic Man introduced the character, who is shown being zapped by telephone wires. The last panel shows him with electric yellow zigzag hair and a bolt of lightning coming out of his left hand, announcing, “I’m Electro Magnetic Man!” This may not seem like the kind of writing students have to do in English class, but they are learning to use such basic literary elements as dialogue, plot, character, and theme.

Once students feel comfortable developing a basic comic strip, they can move on to more elaborate work. One option is to develop their initial strip into a series. Alex asks students to think of themselves as comic artists producing for a daily newspaper, so that they make a new comic strip for every class and complete a whole series within a semester. Malcolm, a sixth grader new to the class, is working on a series called “Fowl Prey,” in which a group of birds conspire to conquer the world. The first strip shows a group of seven or eight birds meeting in the basement of a house, establishing their purpose: to rid the city of other gangs. By the end of the spring semester, Malcolm has produced eight “Fowl Prey” comic strips. The birds have come a long way in carrying out their dastardly plot—and Malcolm has come an equally long way in his ability to use the elements of narrative.

Another option for students is to develop their own comic book. Newer students usually work on producing a four-page comic book, while more seasoned students may produce a complete twenty-two page comic. The process is the same, and Alex has a way of breaking it down into manageable chunks. Like many good afterschool educators, he starts where the students are—with their interests, enthusiasm and ideas. This practice of engaging young people, taking their skill level into account, is central to good youth development.

#### Character and Story Development

Comic book production begins with developing a profile sheet for the main character: What is her motivation and background? What are the main events in her life? Linta, another sixth grader, shows me the profile sheet for her character, Muoliko, drawn in full Japanese *Manga* style and personality. It reads: “Muoliko—she is turned into a half-cat for stealing and eating someone’s magic red bean cakes. She eats them and is kicked out of her house by her sister because her younger brother is allergic to red bean cakes. She takes care of herself. Muoliko trys to find a way to undo the spell. Tomboyish, Age 11, comes from the planet Copiko.” (Interview, April 28, 2004)

Next, students write pitch sheets similar to the ones professional comic artists use to present their work to prospective employers. In this storyline summary, students are not yet working on the exact details, but they have a good idea of the story structure as a whole. Next come script layouts: thumbnails of each page of the comic book. This is the step in which students work out the details of their story. A script layout can take a student an entire semester to produce, because it includes a rough sketch not only of text but also of images.

Together these pieces—character profile sheet, pitch sheet, and script layout—make up a professional presentation package. With this completed, students could easily

go to a comic book industry representative with a portfolio of their work and ‘pitch’ their comic book idea. Once the presentation package is complete, students move on to actually writing, drawing, inking, lettering, and coloring the entire comic.

## **ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

Comic storytelling is a rich medium with which afterschool practitioners can build on and expand the skills and knowledge students learn during the school day. The teacher of the comics class, Alex, makes regular reference to what is taught in Language Arts, English, Social Studies, Science, and History classes. He has students work up single-panel political cartoons, which bring up the opportunity to discuss current events and politics. Students develop and apply what they learn in school in new ways, putting Greek mythology or their fifth-period science experiment into their comics. Of course, they also draw on popular culture references and their own experiences. Whether they’re working from television, the latest video game, or someone they know, ultimately the class is about narrative -- telling stories in visual and literal form.

Engaging young people in comic production is a clever way to help them work on language arts skills. A look at the four New York State English language arts standards reveals how comics can enhance literacy instruction:

Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen and speak for information and understanding.

Standard 2: Students will read, write, listen and speak for literary response and expression.

Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

Standard 4: Students will read, write, listen and speak for social interaction. (New York State English Language Learning Standards, 2004)

Each of these standards is addressed in producing comics. A comic artist must process information by sequencing the plot of a comic before writing it, as demonstrated in students’ development of a character profile sheet and script layouts. Comic art is an expressive, interpretive art form with a long history of techniques and aesthetics; students need to work within this tradition and interpret how the images and text work together to tell the story. In order to effectively tell a comic story, the artist must analyze and evaluate the underlying meaning of the story. The artist must also interact socially with other readers; students often discuss their work in small groups in the comics class. Reading skill is also addressed, as students reading various publications, explore different genres, and learn new vocabulary as background preparation for their own creations. Students often revise their work with the help of the instructor, going through several drafts to produce the final version. This emphasis on comprehension and revision supports both their reading and writing.

In one example of this, the student Hassan came up with a character for his comic because he loves Samurai movies. But when challenged by the instructor to figure out his character's life, Hassan had to do some research to fill in the gaps in his knowledge. Where did Samurais come from? How were they raised—in a noble family, as peasants? How were they trained? Alex starts the exploratory process by asking students what they know about history and mythology, so that they start by building on their own knowledge base. Then Alex helps students find appropriate books to use as references and encourages them to use the web to look up the relevant historical period and read about the places they want to use as settings.

In another example, as Sal worked on his comic, *Electro Magnetic Man strip*, I asked him to describe what was happening. "In the first panel, that's a U.S. battle ship patrolling the waters. In the second panel, that's Napoleon sailing in an old 48-gunner ship and it's about to attack the U.S. ship." "OK, wait," I say, "How do you know so much about ships?" (Interview, May 4, 2004) I found out that Sal is a big fan of ships, and not only from watching the movie *Master and Commander*. He told me about a collection of books about Horatio Hornblower and the British Royal Navy. Although these books are too advanced for him to read, his love of ships has inspired him to listen to the books on tape. Reading them himself is certainly in his future.

## **YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

A comics art class has the potential to capitalize on several youth development opportunities, from helping young people develop literacy skills to grappling with adolescent identity issues. Some outstanding ways that a comics class can support youth development include career exploration which, by definition, includes a vision for the future. In addition, the class helps young people develop and practice problem-solving and conflict resolution skills.

### *Vision for the Future*

Alex helps students connect with the larger world of the comic book industry and gives them room to envision themselves as professional comic artists. In comics class, young people explore all sides of comic book industry. They learn the various roles, such as penciler, writer, inker, editor, colorist, and letterer; sometimes they practice these roles on each other's work, similar to the way production is broken down in the comics industry. Students also get a sense of what the world of comics is like with trips to the Museum of Cartoon and Comic Art (MoCCA), to cartoon film festivals or to comic book publication houses such as DC Comics or Marvel Comics.

By linking comics class to career development, young people have an opportunity to think about their work in a larger context. Helping young people develop a portfolio of their completed work is what professional comic artists do all the time. Whether it is comic art, graphic design, filmmaking, writing children's books, or working for Sesame Street – there are a host of ways to link young people's interest in comic production to the professional world. Ultimately, this gives young people a sense of purpose and future.

### *Problem-solving and Conflict Resolution*

Comic creation also entails a degree of conflict resolution and the ability to make choices. As they create a story, young people have to make problem-solve as well as make choices to deal with their characters' conflicts. I have often seen young people grapple with what direction their character should go, and how they struggle with the consequences of their characters' actions. Such choices push young people to develop problem-solving skills through having to think abstractly and engage in reflection. They have to come up with alternative solutions for both cognitive and social problems. This is a practice arena for these competencies in other aspects of the youth's lives.

## **OTHER BENEFITS & COMPETENCIES**

### Multiple Points of Entry into Literacy

Comic book reading can serve as one of many possible points of entry into literacy. Sometimes students who are failing in school-based literacy activities can shine when they are engaged in literacy activities for which they have a passion. When I asked Hassan how long he'd been reading comics, he said that he'd been into comics since he was five: "Yeah, I used to play lots of video games and my dad wanted me to learn to read so he gave me comic books to read like the original Batman and Superman.... That helped me be more interested in reading and give it a try." (Interview, May 4, 2004)

The varieties of comic books and graphic novels are as diverse as that of any literature, spanning genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and adventure to teen romance and humor. One interesting literary phenomenon has been the introduction of Japanese *Manga*. While, in the West, mainstream comics are almost entirely for children and adolescents, in Japan, many different types of *Manga* are written for people of all ages and both genders. It is not uncommon to see a middle-aged man reading *Manga* on the subway. While the average American comic is 22 pages long, the average *Manga* comic has 350 pages and contains as many as fifteen chapters.

The introduction of *Manga* in the U.S. has opened up a whole new audience for comics: girls. The comic industry in the U.S. has always been geared for a white male audience; the vast majority of comic super-hero characters are white males. There is, however, a whole genre of *Manga* written specifically for girls. Such *Manga* as *Love Hina* and *Pitaten* are written with strong female leads. Partly because of the popularity of *Manga*, at least half of the comics class at Educational Alliance is usually female, and many of the female students' characters reflect the strong female characters found in Japanese comics.

### Adolescent Identity Development

Producing comics not only supports young people's literacy development, but also promotes their identity development. As young people grapple with questions of identity during adolescence, comics production in afterschool programs offers them a unique way to enter into an imagined world that allows them to experiment in safety.

Inventing characters and storylines is a way for young people to express feelings, play out likes and dislikes, make choices, and test new ideas.

Eva, a ninth grader, was in her third year in the comics class. She developed a complete 22-page comic book about Night Shade, a 16-year-old girl whose father was murdered by a police officer. Because the family is poor, Night Shade's father resorts to burglary in order to care for himself and his daughter. On one such expedition, an alarm gets tripped and a police officer is called. Somehow, too much force is used, and Night Shade arrives on the scene to see her father beaten to death by the police officer. Night Shade swears to avenge her father's death by tracking down this police officer. As she has no means of survival, she does what she knows best—she steals. Inevitably, she is caught and sent to prison. There she meets a woman scientist who promises to give her superpowers if Night Shade will, on her release, avenge the scientist's assistant who gave her up to the authorities. With this pact, Night Shade gains powers Eva describes as “speed, strength, agility, and aim. Her secret weapon is the ability to use *night shade*, a poison that she can draw from her veins and inject into others.” (Interview, April 28, 2004) When Night Shade gets out of prison, she goes on a quest to find first the scientist's enemy and then her father's killer. Eva's first full-length comic ends at the point at which Night Shade has tracked down the scientist's assistant and is face to face with him in a late-night brawl in his laboratory.

All of the main characters in student comics are transformed with new powers. Many have been abandoned or orphaned by a parent's accidental or murderous death, others are kicked out of their homes or run away. Many characters adopt new families or friends along the way, usually someone who helps the main character develop his or her new powers and identity. This parallels adolescents' own desire to become empowered and explore their world. Through their characters, these young people try on new identities. When the characters build community with new characters they meet, they are imagining the possible worlds that they, themselves, can occupy. In this moment, the young people are figuring themselves out and making meaning of their world. In creating their own characters—from the kind of personality they have to the clothes they wear, the time periods they occupy, and the adventures they seek—these young comic artists are defining a world of their own choosing.

Shirley Brice Heath (2001) writes that young people's art helps them resist their usual role assignments in the “real” world. Students' characters can be independent in the comic world, making choices that may not be available to authors in their real lives, at least not until they are adults. For young people, who are usually marginalized in adult society, expressing themselves in artistic possibility, in imagined and futuristic scenarios, is a healthy exploration of and sometime rejection of stereotypical societal role assignments.

### **Social Critique**

Eva's *Night Shade* illustrates how the vehicle of comics provides young people with an opportunity to explore and challenge their own social realities through reading

and writing. Eva's comic clearly takes issue with police brutality; it is a complex look at issues of power, class, and gender—issues Eva confronts in her daily life. Some of Eva's friends in school are young men of color who typically face harassment by the police. Eva uses the experience of her friends and her knowledge of the world in her comic book. She has subverted the traditional role of the police officer as “good guy” to reveal both her critique of institutional power and how she grapples with issues of police brutality and the abuse of power and privilege.

Students' appropriation of *Manga* characters or Samurai warriors is also a challenge to the world of the traditional male superhero. When I asked Hassan to describe Hazara, he said, “Well, he kind of reflects my personality—he can be serious, and he can get into trouble. He's kind of irresponsible, but a good leader, and likes to fight.” (Interview, May 4, 2004) Having gotten to know Hassan, I was not surprised to hear that he related personally to the characters he was creating. The previous semester, he had created, for the end-of-year visual arts display, a dreadlocked superhero that he said was based on himself, “but someone with powers.” Students' characters take on new identities of race, class, gender, and culture, often morphing all of these in ways that extend or parallel the struggles in their communities and in their own lives.

## **SUMMARY**

Adolescents are in the midst of a soul-searching process of identity development and are at a time when their interest in books and writing often wanes. In afterschool settings, a comics production class provides a safe, creative space where young people can test limits, exploring their worlds in outrageous and playful ways while at the same time developing literacy interests and abilities that support academic learning.

The semester ends with the students showing their work in the school's second floor display cabinets as part of the end-of-year afterschool visual arts show. Alex had made the students' comics into an *ashcan*, a magazine of comic art, which was copied for students to take home. Many of the students sign up for the comics class again to continue working on their pieces or to start new projects. Some will continue to inhabit their comic worlds over the summer, catching up on their favorite comic books or continuing to work on their original stories. The comics class has been a fun and productive way for students to spend their Wednesday afternoons, as well as a semester of learning, expanding literacy skills, and exploring new worlds.

## **REPLICATION**

There are many ways to adapt the program to your own afterschool setting. Ideally, a good teaching artist is key – someone who has worked in the comic book field, as an illustrator or writer. You want to be sure that the person you hire is not only versed in the comic medium, but like all afterschool instructors, is a good teacher and works well with young people. Some places you might want to post for an instructor are at the art departments of local colleges and universities, or with local comic book houses such as DC Comics and Marvel Comics in New York City. The Director of School of the

Future contacted DC Comics in New York, and was led to Alex, who did some freelance writing for them and had previously worked with local youth groups. Each instructor will have their own ideas about the design of a comic book curriculum.

If finding a qualified instructor proves to be difficult, there are ways to introduce comic art into the afterschool setting on a smaller scale. Buy one of the many books listed in the Resources section that give you step-by-step instructions on drawing comics. These books outline the basics – from supplies you’ll need like pencils and drawing paper – to ideas for exercises to get young people thinking about and creating comic art.

The focus of a comics class doesn’t have to be on teaching the students how to draw. Young people have a range of styles and will find a way to draw whatever is in their imagination. Youth comic art, and even professional comic art, ranges from simple stick-figure drawings to highly stylized and anatomically correct characters. While Alex is skilled in teaching youth the fundamentals of drawing and anatomy, the key is in working with young people to develop an idea into a story. You can start with the most basic idea of developing a character. If time is limited, the class can develop a collective character.

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