Introduction

The Production of Comic Books in a College Writing Class

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In a 2017 *College English* article, Aubrey Schiavone reveals "a disparity between theories and practices associated with visual and multimodal composition" (376). Her analysis of rhetoric and composition textbooks published over the last ten years leads her to conclude, "Theories assert the importance of the production of visual and multimodal compositions, while the practices encapsulated in these textbook prompts promote the consumption of visual and multimodal compositions more so than their production" (376). Specifically, only "13 percent of the total 1,692 assignments" analyzed from the textbooks "prompt visual or multimodal production" as student tasks (376). Schiavone's work suggests that writing instructors need to find creative and innovative ways to incorporate multimodal composition into the classroom since textbooks may not offer extensive guidance in this regard.

The production of comics offers one such possibility for multimodal composition in the writing classroom. In a 2015 *Composition Studies* article, Kathryn Comer explores the potential for a graphic memoir to offer a "rhetorically conscious approach to multimodal composition" (77). She argues, "Thus far, pedagogical discussions about comics in the college classroom have focused primarily on *reading*, with less attention paid to the complementary potential of *composing* comics" (75). Just as Schiavone observes a privileging of multimodal consumption overproduction in textbooks, Comer finds a similar trend in pedagogical scholarship on teaching

comics in the writing classroom. She notes, "despite the surge of academic interest in comics, there has been a relative neglect of comics in published scholarship within composition studies, though ongoing experimentation is evident in online resources and conference programs" (76). Taken together, Schiavone's and Comer's work suggests that multimodal texts such as comics are often used as reading assignments that lead to the production of a purely text-based assignment. However, their work also provides an impetus for writing instructors to explore how the production of multimodal texts can be integrated into a college writing class and how such tasks might enrich students' learning. Several questions therefore arise. What kinds of texts should students produce? How should multimodal production assignments be sequenced within the course curriculum? What specific outcomes do we hope to achieve through these assignments?

The articles in this roundtable address these questions in the context of a comic book assignment developed at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. With the help of our university library's media specialist, Jared Bendis, my colleagues and I have experimented with the use of a comic book assignment in a first-year L2 writing classroom. This assignment stems from a conversation I first had with Bendis in August 2016. We discussed potential multimodal assignments for my class, and he suggested that students could create comic books as one way to creatively compose a persuasive text. I was immediately intrigued by this suggestion, particularly because I have taught comics in the past but only as a reading assignment, rather than a writing assignment. From that conversation onward, I have been fortunate to benefit from the expertise and input of Bendis. He introduced me to Comic Life, a

software program for designing comics, and helped me craft an assignment prompt that includes a "pitch" to turn students' attention toward the act of persuasion. This initial assignment sheet on which Bendis and I collaborated is available in the Appendix. After piloting this assignment during the Fall 2016 semester, I introduced it to my colleagues, who then implemented the task in subsequent semesters. We all used the assignment sheet in the Appendix as a base, but we have made and will continue to make adjustments in the coming semesters based on student feedback and our own observations. Although all three of us teach sections of the same first-year L2 writing course and therefore must meet the same curricular outcomes, we have the freedom to design our individual sections (including assignments and readings) around a topical theme of our choosing. We have found that a major strength of this assignment is its adaptability: it can easily be adapted to suit any course theme and also meet the needs of instructors who may have different teaching styles and pedagogical priorities.

In the articles that follow, we each address a different aspect of the comic book assignment as it has supported our themes and teaching goals. I discuss how the production of comics can help students learn the value of research evidence. Hee-Seung Kang discusses how she incorporates such an assignment into her curriculum to teach multimodal argument and foster critical thinking skills. Shaofei Lu explores how a comic book assignment can provide a writing safe space for students to use global varieties of English. Although our classrooms are populated exclusively by international students, we hope to show that a comic book assignment with an argumentative or persuasive component can be adapted for a variety of classroom contexts and diverse populations of learners. As our experiences reveal, the flexibility of this

assignment allows instructors to modify the task not only to suit individual course themes but also to target a range of learning outcomes, including but not limited to those of the first-year L2 writing classroom.

To facilitate the production of comic books, my colleagues and I ask students to use the Comic Life software (available at plasq.com). As mentioned previously, Bendis introduced me to this software, and he regularly leads sessions for my classes and my colleagues' classes that guide students through the basic tools. The software is available for a free 30-day trial, and this opportunity allows students to complete their assignment without financial cost. This software also allows students to create comics even if they claim to have no artistic talent. Many students may be intimidated by the prospect of creating a visual narrative. Thus, having access to such software is essential for helping students craft aesthetically pleasing products without the anxiety that might otherwise accompany such a project. Indeed, the technological affordances further enrich students' experiences with multimodal composition and allow them to expand their knowledge of digital composing tools when navigating the Comic Life space. The software also invites classroom conversations about visual design and the relationship between images and text.

In the process of creating their comics and critiquing their peers' productions, students not only learn skills they can transfer to other multimodal composing acts, but they also gain practice in targeting a specific audience for a clearly defined purpose. While Comer persuasively argues that graphic memoirs offer a "rhetorically conscious approach to multimodal composition" (77), the work that my colleagues and I have undertaken suggests that comics that

are *not* categorized as memoirs can serve a similar purpose. Our assignments invite students to draw upon personal experiences, but they ultimately write fictional stories that may or may not resemble their own lives. The key factor we want to emphasize is that students must persuade their readers of something. They must aim to change their readers' beliefs or actions in some way. We each tailor this component to our specific course themes, but overall, we have found that such a "rhetorically conscious approach," to borrow Comer's term, helps students see their work not merely as entertaining but also as socially important. Many students approach the assignment having read comics as children or young adults. However, rarely have they read comics that address a more serious topic relevant to their lives such as diversity, multilingualism, educational equity, or personal health. Therefore, the comic book assignment allows students to begin with a familiar genre but then explore that genre's potential for generating change within a specific community. An awareness of how writing can be used as a mechanism for social consciousness-raising is often what we seek to achieve through text-based writing assignments. Therefore, the comic book assignment can serve both as a means of preparation for later academic writing tasks as well as a challenging and rigorous writing task in its own right.

We hope that our experiences described in this forum will resonate with other writing instructors who, like us, seek to reinvent and reinvigorate their course curricula to suit the constantly evolving needs of today's writing classrooms.

Appendix

Comic Book Project

Deadlines
- "Pitch" due Monday, 10/3 (written in your Writing Journal and brought to class)
- 1st draft due Wednesday, 10/12 (bring 1 printed copy to class)
    We will review your drafts as a class and collaboratively offer feedback.
- Graded version due Wednesday, 10/19 (bring 1 printed copy to class + printed rationale)

Audience
You are writing the comic book for an audience of students at our university. You may choose to further narrow your audience (by gender, age, culture, etc.) if appropriate to your topic. The audience for your rationale is only your instructor.

Length & Format

Comic Book
- 8 pages, images + words

Rationale
- 1-2 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman size 12 font, 1-inch margins all around

Task
The premise of this assignment is to convince college students, or a particular subgroup, to believe _____ about a health issue relevant to their lives. This line has been intentionally left blank because it's up to YOU to decide your specific topic.

For example, you may want to persuade college students to believe in the importance of drinking 64 ounces of water every day, or getting at least 6 hours of sleep each night, or avoiding alcohol. It's important to remember that simply telling your audience to do or *not* to do something usually isn't effective. Instead, you need to try to change their <u>beliefs</u> about the topic first, and that's the goal of this comic book. Your job is to use the visual narrative format to tell a story that will entertain, educate, and hopefully change the beliefs of your audience so that they ultimately may change their behaviors as well. Have fun and be creative.

Pitch: On Monday, October 3, you should come to class with the following sentence completed: "I'm going to persuade [target audience] to believe [??????] in 8 pages because [why you care]."

Rationale: After you compose and revise your comic book, write a brief essay explaining your narrative and design choices. How and why did you decide to tell this particular story? How and why did you use particular images? List any outside sources consulted at the end (APA format).

Assessment Rubric

	Exceeds expectations (23-25 pts.)	Meets expectations (20-22 pts.)	Does not meet expectations (0-19 pts.)
Persuasive storytelling (25 pts.) The comic tells a clear, coherent story that has a plot, identifiable characters, and a believable storyworld. The story is clearly aimed at a specific target audience and seeks to persuade that audience of a specific belief and/or action. The reasons why the audience should believe/act in that way are clearly stated or implied.			
Use of text & images (25 pts.) The comic uses good quality images that are clear, easy to understand, logical, and necessary to advance the story. All text (narrative and dialogue) complements the images. The comic is not too "text-heavy." Text is mostly free of grammatical errors.			
Engagement (25 pts.) The author seems to care about the topic. The story is engaging and entertaining to read. The author establishes a humorous and/or serious tone that keeps the reader interested.			

Rationale (25 pts.) Narrative & design choices are explained clearly and logically. Sources/credit given.			

Works Cited

Comer, Kathryn. "Illustrating Praxis: Comic Composition, Narrative Rhetoric, and Critical

Multiliteracies." *Composition Studies* 43.1 (2015): 75-104.

Schiavone, Aubrey. "Consumption, Production, and Rhetorical Knowledge in Visual and

Multimodal Textbooks." *College English* 79.4 (2017): 358-380.