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Drawn Out: Comics in the classroom

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CASE STUDY 13

North Wales School of Art & Design, Glyndŵr University

Drawn Out: Comics in the classroom.

Category: outreach,

Keywords: graphic novels, reluctant readers, adolescent male readers, library services, partnerships, literacy, basic skills

Abstract

Illustration staff at the North Wales School of Art & Design were approached in November of 2008 by Frances Jones of the North East Wales Schools Library Service to run a series of practical workshops in local schools. The project was funded by the Basic Skills Agency and was designed to encourage reluctant male readers aged 12 - 14 to engage with the library services available and become interested in reading through graphic novels. The project was a partnership between Wrexham, Denbighshire and Flint County Councils, The North Wales Schools Library Service, The Basic Skills Agency and The North Wales School of Art & Design, part of Glyndŵr University.

Context and Rationale

The North Wales School of Art & Design was approached by Frances Jones of the North East Wales Schools Library Service to run practical workshops in local schools. The approach was due to their BA in Illustration for Graphic Novels and the attached staff expertise in this largely unexplored area of academic study. The project was funded by the Basic Skills Agency and was designed to encourage reluctant male readers aged 12 - 14 to engage with the library services available and become interested in reading through graphic novels. Frey & Fisher (2008, p106), explain the value of graphic novels in this context:

> Comic books invite our students to make such contributions precisely because their very presence begs the question, "What is literature?" That is, most people are not (?) convinced that comic books have any literary value; in fact, most people are not convinced that they have any value whatsoever, aside from the money paid by collectors for rare issues. Because comics are generally held in such disregard, students find them more approachable and are thus more willing to make comments about literary quality.

It was originally envisioned that the project would comprise of six half-day sessions in six secondary schools in North East Wales. It became apparent during the planning process that this would be an unmanageable quantity, and the proposal was scaled back to six sessions in three schools. The six sessions would include a primary session to be led by Dr. Melanie Gibson of Northumbria University, a prominent figure in UK comics scholarship. These sessions, to be conducted in the students local libraries in most instances, introduced the students to the range of comics and graphic literature available to borrow and served to address some of the existing preconceptions surrounding the medium. The remaining five sessions were allocated to practical sessions in which the students would generate their own comic strips and were facilitated by North Wales School of Art & Design staff, graduates and students.

The five practical sessions were structured into into themes for each, and included character and environment design, narrative structure, panel transitions and sound effects

and typography. The sessions were designed to introduce the students to the processes involved in the creation of sequential narratives, from the generation of characters, their placement into an environment and the ways in which a narrative can be communicated. These practical sessions were initially conducted by staff from the North Wales School of Art & Design, but as the students became more comfortable with the work that was expected of them, the sessions were supervised by graduates and current students of The North Wales School of Art & Design. The students that facilitated these sessions found the experience to be very rewarding, and found that both the pace, and in many cases, the ingenuity of the work produced to be hugely inspirational, and motivated them in their own work.

The group size in each instance was to be limited to 30 students, and the duration of the sessions to half a day. Although of the practical sessions were consistent in content across each of the schools, the environment that the sessions were conducted in, the constitution of the student groups and the participation of school staff varied across each location. The original aim for the project was that each session would be conducted in the school's local library to introduce the students to the services provided by the library and to encourage them to engage with books. The varied situations of each of the schools and libraries involved however quickly became problematic in organisation, and a locational compromise was reached as follows;

	School A	School B	School C
Introductory Session	School Library	Local Library	Local Library
Practical Sessions	School Library	School Library	Local Library/ School Library
Summary Session	School Library	Local Library	Local Library

At the organisational stage, it was anticipated that students at School A would gain the least in terms of measurable outcomes as the students at no time had any sessions conducted in the public library, while School C would gain most for the opposite reason. It was predicted that the results for School B would fall somewhere between School A and School B.

In addition to the location of each session as a variable, each school selected the group of 30 students against differing criteria. Student groups at School A were carefully selected to exclude the more disruptive students, School B selected their group to comprise the students whose literacy levels were lower on the whole than the rest of the year group and School C selected entire form groups to participate.

The way that each group interacted with each other and staff was directly influenced by the constitution of each group. Groups at School A typically interacted well with fellow students and staff. Students at School B were more difficult to motivate initially, while students at School C were more easily distracted by the more disruptive students in the group.

Staff participation at each school had in many instances a huge effect on the engagement of the students. Staff at School A were actively engaged with the facilitation of the project, and provided a familiar authority figure. A principal member of staff at

School B was cynical from the outset as to the validity or effectiveness of the project, a position that had repercussions on the perception of the project in the student group. Staff at School C were also present in an authoritative capacity, but were less engaged with the facilitation of the project than School A.

The students at School A generated by far the largest volume of work, with what could be broadly described as the most well developed concepts and narratives. The work generated by School B was on the whole of a far poorer quality than School A, with a couple of exceptions. The member of teaching staff at School B that was cynical about the effectiveness of the project had also discarded a portion of the work that was deemed not good enough before the project had reached completion. School C generated a quantity of work that rested between Schools A & B, but the quality was by far the most disappointing of the whole project.

In the schools that separated the groups of students between year groups, usually between school years 7 - 9, there was very little disparity between the quality or quantity of work produced, although all year groups agreed that the year 7 students had a far more flexible imagination, as the year 9 students were now 'grown up', an assertion that was not evident in the work produced, both groups producing work of an equally inventive nature.

In conclusion, although it was anticipated that School A's students would gain the least from the project due to the location of the workshops, and School C would gain the most, this appeared not to be the case. Judging by the work produced and feedback received from school and library staff, it would seem that School A found the project most rewarding. School library staff at School B commented on the increase in interest in graphic novels in the school library.

The project is significant in its difference from traditional literacy projects as the emphasis is placed not solely on textual writing and comprehension, but also upon the student's visual comprehension. As Frey and Fisher (2008) point out, visual elements, used in conjunction with textual elements, can act as an 'anchor' to which the student is more likely to retain the lesson:

> Probably the most compelling reason for using images in instruction is that images are stored in long-term memory. Unlike factoids and phone numbers that can 'go in one ear and out the other,' images are indelibly etched in our long-term memory. (Frey & Fisher, 2008:11

If the project was to be repeated, there are a number of alterations that may provide a more cohesive experience for all involved. There were staffing issues with North Wales School of Art & Design graduates, who had to withdraw due to personal reasons and be replaced at very short notice. Although this was unforeseeable, it is preferable to have a regular team of staff facilitating the practical sessions to ensure a consistency in content and delivery. It became evident in the schools that had an engaged staff team that the students attained a higher level of engagement themselves. It would be recommended that an additional session be conducted with school staff to familiarise then with the processes that would be introduced to the students. Given many of the preconceptions surrounding comics and graphic novels, it is important to ensure that any preexisting prejudices are addressed before the commencement of the project. It would be proposed that where possible, the practical sessions be conducted at the school's facilities. In some instances, the journey to the local library served to excite some of the more easily distracted students. The facilities at the library were also in some cases not ideal for the required purposes, being either poorly equipped or lacking adequate capacity for 30 teenagers.

A final point: basic literacy is not usually associated with the university but this project demonstrates that academic expertise in a particular area (here the Graphic novel) can lead to a productive relationship with education and library services that benefits the wider community.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The potential for encouraging people with lower engagement with literacy to engage through the use and creation of graphic narratives has become more apparent through the coordination of this project. Reading graphic narratives presents potential for engaging with literacy in a format that is not intimidating to a reluctant reader, and creating these narratives presents a cost effective and intuitive method of interacting with literacy.

The project could also be amended and extended to cater for a different section of society with lower literacy levels, for example to be conducted within prison libraries, potentially in conjunction with a charitable organisation such as The Literacy Trust and their Prison Reading Champions scheme.

Although I remain skeptical about the efficiency of creating comics as a tool for aiding literacy in reluctant readers, it has appeared at this stage to merit further investigation. Many of the issues that I am skeptical about could however be addressed by limiting the overall reach of the project initially to work more frequently with smaller groups of students over shorter periods of time. Staff would be introduced to the projects sooner and involved more in the planning and preparation of the project to give them a sense of ownership over the sessions. I believe that this would limit many of the impediments experienced during the project.

FURTHER READING

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