Not the Usual Suspects:
Poetry and Graphic Novels as
21st Century Tools

Mark Geary

T eachers frequently look at the broad array of technology tools to help students prepare for the 21st Century, and rightfully so. Computers, iPads, mobile devices and a vast assortment of Internet resources all can be used effectively to improve student learning outcomes.

The "3R's", Reading, "Riting" and "Rithmetic" have been supplemented by an increased focus on the four Cs, Collaboration, Communication , Communication and Critical Thinking. However, in the rush to twitter about the latest blog post extolling the virtues of online professional learning networks, it might be good to take a step back, take a deep breath, and re-examine some tools that have been around a while but are frequently underused.

While attending an Adobe Education Leader workshop in San Jose, this author spoke with Kathy Smith, Chair of the University of Southern California Film and Animation graduate program. Her students and program works with film and animation projects at the highest levels, her students have gone on to be leaders in the film and animation industries. I spoke with her to discover what "the best of the best" were doing to keep on top of the rapidly evolving world of animation and film. The results were surprising.

First discussed were course textbooks. This author uses Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud as one of the textbooks for Children's Literature, as it serves the dual purpose of helping students understand how visual images relate to a story, as well as serving as a primer for developing storyboards for video projects. While visiting the Dakota State University campus bookstore, the author was surprised to find that the McCloud book was also used as one of the course texts for Visual Rhetoric, one of the required writing courses at the technology focused Dakota State University. Still more surprising, though, was that fact that Understanding Comics is also used for the capstone course of University of Southern California's Film and Animation graduate program.

Dr. Smith explained something this author had suspected, but had not had a chance to confirm. Knowing how to "read" the visual images and perspectives in comics is a key component to being able to develop storyboards used in film and animation creation. She also went on to explain that poetry was a critical part of the course, as it helped students develop and understanding of timing and rhythm so crucial to successful film and animation projects. For this article though, let's just look at graphic novels and comics.

Will Eisner initiate the term "Graphic Novels", and describes them as "Sequential Art...the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea." There is a tremendous amount of literature surrounding the use of graphic novels, but one of the key originators of the genre, Will Eisner, says it best when he describes the reader of a graphic novel as the "co-conspirator in the story creation process". Graphic novels and comic strip sequences use the prior knowledge and expectations of the reader to help guide the flow of the visual narrative. In some of the best graphic novels, this is done by giving the reader information using the combination of pictures and words that deliver more than either could separately. For example, in the Pulitzer prize winning graphic novel, Maus, we see a sequence of images carefully arranged to show the authors' father pedaling a stationary bicycle.

As you can see, the author-illustrator, Art Spiegelman, carefully puts himself in the background while putting is

father's forearm, with the death camp tattoo in the foreground. This completes the contrary juxtaposition of image and words, where the father is SAYING "No one wants to hear ... such stories", but the image is making the reader connect, and think, "I want to know how that happened, and how he survived!" Since one of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension is getting students to interact with the text, instead of reading passively, it becomes apparent that graphic novels can serve multiple purposes; that of guiding students into an understanding of the storyboarding process AND improving their reading comprehension.
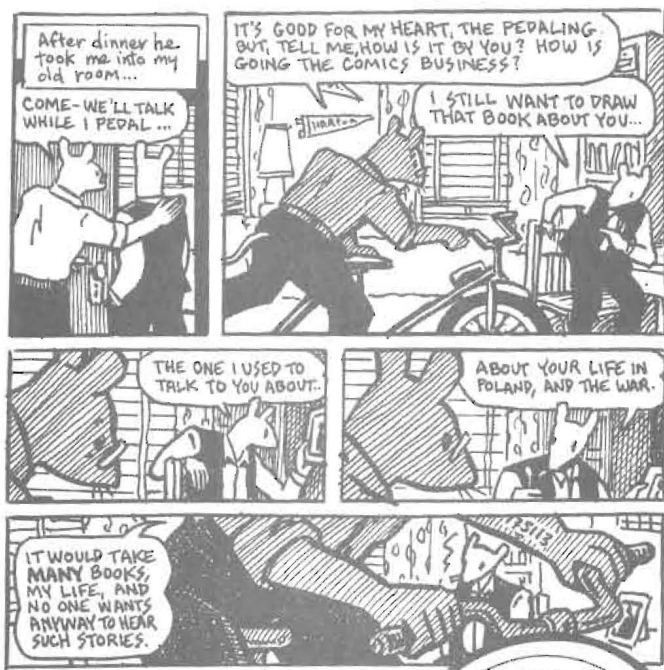

For the last hundred years, professional communications relied heavily on the skill of typing. In the next hundred, it is quite possible that the video medium will be the primary form of communication. To be successful in that medium, students will need to storyboard their ideas, as well as be able to "read" (and write) visual images.

Graphic novels can help students develop their visual literacy skills, as they will see both a wide variety of visual styles as well as writing styles. In addition, where movies and videos are time constrained (one of the reasons poetry is important), graphic novels are not. Movies have difficulty displaying thinking, often needing to artificially add another person for dialog to occur, graphic novels do not. In a graphic novel, all that is typically needed is the cloud shaped speech bubble.

Stephen Krashen (2004) notes in his book, *The Power of Reading*, that comic books often serve as an intermediary, helping readers become more linguistically proficient before moving on to heavier reading. While graphic novels are frequently recognized for their ability to help students develop an increased interest in reading, increase literacy, in the broad sense of the word, develop vocabulary and develop an interest in a broad range of topics (DeVos, 1999), they have the additional benefit of being able to help students read and write storyboards. By stimulating the creative imagination,

students develop an increased understanding of how meaning is found in visual phenomena.
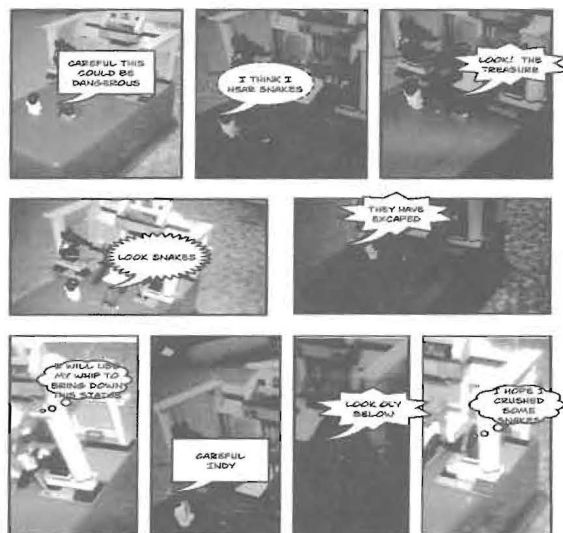
4th Grade interpretation of Indiana Jones' Raiders of the Lost Arc, captured via legos and comic life.

We can gauge the importance of the video medium, to a degree, by following it's widespread increase and use through society. Youtube alone has generated more content in it's first five years than NBC, CBS and ABC combined did in their first 75 years. To be successful in the video medium, students need to know how to storyboard to communicate their ideas. We do not need all of our students to be Steven Spielberg, but we do need to teach them how to communicate effectively in the 21st century.

Scaffolding the writing process for video has become easier with the new generation of tools available online, as well as some old standbys. Kidpix is still a good introductory tool for very young children in kindergarten or 1st grade, WebKinz Studio works well for second and third graders. From fourth grade on, more advanced tools are easily incorporated, beginning with ComicLife and Photostory 3 for easy video creation from pictures, and progressing to more advanced tools such as Voicethread.com, AdobeStory, Adobe Elements and XtraNormal. Getting started is the key, not waiting for perfection. Have fun with the process, and let your students lead when possible.

References

DeVos, G. (1999). How to Choose Graphic Novels. Quill and Quire, 65(1),44

Eisner, W. (1985). Comics and Sequential Art (p5) W.W.Norton New York, NY

Krashen, S. (2004). The Power of Reading, Insights from the Research, Libraries Unlimited, 2nd Ed.

Mark Geary is asst. prof. at Dakota State University, Madison, SD. He may be reached at:Mark.Geary@dsu.edu