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Student Storytelling through Sequential Art

Most all of us are familiar with one form or another of sequential art, a term that the late illustrator Will Eisner (1985, 5) coined for an art form that has come to include cartoons, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. It is an international art form. Most French people can recall a scene from *Tintin* or *Asterix;* most Turks are familiar with the adventures of *Red Kit;* it is hard to find a South American who does not adore *Mafalda* or is not an avid follower of the sharp wit and social commentary in Quino's cartoons; the Indian sub-continent has access to *Chacha Chavdhary* in 10 languages; and Finns can actually pronounce the name of one of their comic book heroes, *Kapteeni Hyperventilanttorimies*. The Japanese have their own version of the art form, manga, which now covers several racks in most bookstores across the United States. These books can be found next to the rows of bound anthologies of American classics such as *Spiderman*, *Archie*, and the *Fantastic Four*, collections that go back over three generations.

Despite its popularity, sequential art has long been misunderstood. After widespread use throughout the first half of the 20th century, comic books in the United States came under attack in the 1950s when psychiatrist Frederic Wertham wrote, in his highly influential *Seduction of the Innocent*, that they are a "reinforcing factor in children's reading disorders" (1954, 130). Their meatier sibling, the graphic novel, has long been associated with the seedier end of the vast content spectrum sequential art covers and has only recently been recognized as a serious literary medium. Max Collins' *Road to Perdition*, which was later turned into a Hollywood blockbuster, Jeff Smith's Bone series, and Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer prize-winning *Maus* all play important roles in casting a more positive light on graphic novels.

In the United States comic books are, unfortunately, still regarded by many parents and educators as academically detrimental, despite the fact that a growing body of research

has shown otherwise. Research by Hayes and Ahrens (1988) highlights the fact that comic books contain a greater number of rare words than ordinary conversation and are thus an excellent stepping stone to more difficult reading. Dorrell and Carroll (1981) and Ujiie and Krashen (1996a, 1996b) found that the increased use of comic books stimulates the reading of non-comics material. Krashen (2004) points out that anyone still willing to associate juvenile delinquency with comic book reading should consider the example of South Africa's Bishop Desmond Tutu, who praises the role comic books played in his childhood.

Why use sequential art in the EFL class?

The reasons sequential art is such a popular commercial art form—visual appeal, versatility, efficiency and power of message—also justify its use in the modern foreign language classroom. Students are attracted by the rich interplay of graphics and text and by the quality of the story, a distinguishing feature of authentic sources of language. Unlike many EFL resources, the plot is not sacrificed for the benefit of a graded approach to language. The higher quality of the story, coupled with the ability of the reader to connect visually with the cartoon characters, means that students invest in the comics intellectually and emotionally (Cary 2004). Its lower readability level (Wright and Shermann 1999) and the support of graphics also ensure learners can access the authentic language with less trouble than they have with most other authentic sources.

Cary (2004, 33) points out that sequential art is rich in ellipses, blends, non-words (*uh-huh, humph, sheesh*!), and other common aspects of spoken language, exposing students to "the ambiguity, vagueness and downright sloppiness of spoken English" (Williams 1995, 25). Sequential art is a window on the spoken vernacular, a variety of the target language that is commonly overlooked in EFL classes in large part due to its absence in both educational material and in more formal authentic texts. The obvious absence of an informal register from a students' linguistic repertoire is a key contributing factor to misunderstanding and confusion when students confront a native speaker of English or when they watch a film in English. While some authors of fiction successfully approximate the nature of human speech, their works do not contain the visual support that sequential art offers, nor are they generally as accessible, in terms of language level, as sequential art. And while film is another important source of this less formal variety of spoken English, it requires technology that many classrooms around the world lack. Films also lack the visual permanence of the written page that allows students to read and re-read target expressions in comic books as often as they like.

Sequential art also provides an up-to-date look at target language culture and society. As an art form that is kept current by active publishing houses, newspapers, and the Internet, it is a widely accessible source of popular topics, concerns, and fashions that can interest almost any age level. And as most comics involve a number of characters from different backgrounds interacting over a long period of time, they can serve as a tool for studying socio-cultural aspects of a people, allowing a teacher to design a lesson based solely on cross-cultural differences and similarities between the target language culture and the students' native culture. Due to the taboo status of the art form in the 1950s in the United States, many comics have a healthy dose of "other-ness" that often takes the shape of cynicism and irony. This makes comic books a rich source of alternative points of view within the target culture and can, as such, provide a perspective that will help fuel discussion and debate (Chilcoat and Ligon 1994).

The enthusiasm for using sequential art in the language classroom has spurred the publication of many articles and ideas. Cary's outstanding teacher's resource book, *Going Graphic*, contains probably the most complete treatment of the subject to date. There are also several good articles that specifically address the use of comics in the EFL classroom. Among the better articles are Noemi Csabay's (2006) "Using comic strips in language classes" and Neil Williams' (1995) "The Comic Book as Course Book: Why and How." In this article I will look at student-created sequential art, a topic that only a handful of authors have discussed, albeit usually with reference to the native speaker class.

One of the biggest advantages to having students create their own sequential art is that they take ownership of the learning process, with the added benefit that the product of their effort can become a permanent part of the classroom. This helps solve one of the more serious problems in EFL today: a lack of materials. Good comic books can be kept for future classes and, due to their widespread appeal, can be used with different age and language levels in a school. A project initiated by a Peace Corps Volunteer in Uzbekistan resulted in bound, printed copies of student-generated stories that were based on popular folk tales and fables. They are now in their fourth year of use. During the creative process, students practiced research skills, developed their literacy and critical thinking skills, and mastered the structure of storytelling. As students work collaboratively on such projects, they also negotiate language among themselves and with the teacher, adding to each other's language knowledge as the project progresses.

Students can cover a wide array of topics through this art form. Sequential art can revisit or summarize stories that the students have read in class or for homework, thus serving as a comprehension check or as an assessment tool. Sequential art can be used to increase student interest in a subject, as Bryan, Chilcoat and Morrison (2002) accomplished with a social studies unit on the native Arctic coastal Inuit way of life. In his "Take a stand" activity, Cary (2004, 100) argues for introducing the editorial cartoon, emphasizing a Freirian model of reflection and social action. Another author, Mulholland (2004), emphasizes the healing power of comics and argues that one should use "the creation of comic book characters and worlds to work through problems in [one's] life" (42). Autobiographies or biographies of family members, descriptions of cultural celebrations, how-to instructions for a favorite hobby, even complex grammar explanations are all potential subject matters for this elastic art form.

Creating sequential art in the EFL class

Below is a step-by-step approach to help teachers get their students started with this art form. This approach focuses on raising awareness of specific social concerns through storytelling. By addressing a topic with real-life implications, students learn more about their community, city, or country and are inspired to explore solutions that can lead to meaningful follow-on activities. By fictionalizing the topic, students are able to use their imaginations to explore a multitude of possible scenarios rather than simply report on the facts. With their invented characters, they can approach the topic through the eyes of another, adding a rich variety of perspectives on the topic. The coupling of text and graphics packs a punch. Be prepared to have fun. And be prepared to enjoy, and to have other classes enjoy, the power of the students' messages and stories.

Step 1: Exploring sequential art

Begin by familiarizing students with the art form by bringing in samples that cover a range of styles, content, and functions (news stories, advertisements, instruction booklets, comic books, etc.). Material in the students' native language can be used for this part of the process, but keep in mind that the Internet is also an excellent source of English language materials. (See the "Websites of Interest" listed at the end of the article.) Students should begin exploring the overall layout and approach to sequential art, the balance of visual and text, and the use of speech bubbles or dialogue balloons (characters' speech), thought clouds (characters' thoughts) and captions (text at the top or bottom of a panel). Some of the key questions that students should discuss are as follows.

1. What is the story about? If an advertisement, what is the message? If a user's manual, what does it explain?
2. What role do the graphics (drawings) play? Do they add to the story, message, or explanation? How so? Can you understand the story without the graphics? (The teacher can provide a handout, use the board or do a dictation to have the students focus on all or part of the graphics-free text.)
3. What is the role of the text? Can you understand the story or message without the text? (The teacher can provide a handout with the text covered or whited-out.)

4. What kinds of characters are used? Are they realistic? Do they represent something? If so, what?
5. Do the characters speak in full sentences? Why or why not? What kinds of new words and expressions do you see?
6. In what order are the panels (the basic unit of sequential art, the "picture frame" of the art form) read? In what order are the speech bubbles read? Practice mapping the movement of your eye through the page. After comparing with another student, what are the similarities and differences in the way you read the panels?

Teachers should introduce the following questions specifically for stories.

1. How many panels does the artist use to tell the story?
2. What are the basic parts of the story (setting the scene, introducing characters, developing the plot, climax, other)? How many panels are used for each part?
3. Are there any panels the artist could have inserted? Which ones and where? Why do you think they were left out? (Why did the artist choose the specific panels on the page?)
4. What different perspectives does the artist use (eye-level view, close-up, bird's-eye view, etc.)? How does the perspective add to the emotion or energy of the scene?
5. Was the story good? If you had been the author, what would you have done differently?

Many students are probably familiar with sequential art, but they may not have looked at it with a critical eye. The idea of this first step is to get students to look more closely at the art form and to explore its power and secrets as future creators. While there are right and wrong answers for some of the questions above, answers will vary according to the samples of sequential art the teacher shares with the class.

Step 2: Establishing project groups

If the project is to be a collaborative effort, this is the best stage during which to form groups. While not essential, work groups are probably the best way to work with an art form that involves a considerable level of artistic talent, storytelling expertise, and planning. Some students will obviously be better visual artists than others, while others will be better at finding just the right language for a specific character. A project of this size has a greater chance of succeeding if it taps into an array of talents. A collaborative approach also ensures that issues are discussed among group members as the story is being developed, thus enhancing the language learning experience on and off the page.

The world of commercial comics has clear-cut job titles: researcher, writer, penciler, inker, colorist, letterer, and editor. This breakdown of responsibilities does not readily fit the goals of an EFL class, which is to involve all members in the research, writing, and editing phases of the project. The jobs of "penciling," or sketching the images in a panel, "inking," or outlining the sketches with ink, "coloring," or adding color to the drawing, and "lettering," or writing words into the speech bubbles, thought clouds, and captions, can be distributed among the group. As one might guess, the job of penciler is the one that requires the most artistic skill and talent. While a group might have a standout artist, it is still a good idea to involve other students in this time-consuming phase. We will have a look in Step 7 at alternative approaches to dealing with the artwork.

A group of three or four students works best. It maximizes the potential to include group members in almost all aspects of the work yet does not burden the students with too much work, as might happen when working in pairs. It is also helpful if the students know that their effort and their project will be assessed, both on a group and individual basis. Progress checks and frequent informal consultations with the teacher will help, although a student-created "group contract" works even better. This is an agreement made by the students in the group that describes who will do what parts of the project. The teacher gives an overview of the tasks and the students decide on how best to share the responsibilities. The agreement can be re-negotiated as the project progresses, and it can be handed in to the teacher, with progress check notes, at the end

of the project. Whatever shape or form the assessment mechanism takes, the goal is to motivate the students to be supportive of one another so that they collaborate on all phases of the project.

Step 3: Choosing a topic

Some schools have an integrated curriculum that concurrently addresses themes across a range of subject areas. This means that at some stage during the school year the math, literature, and social science teachers all cover the theme of, to choose a few examples, the environment, health, or space exploration. The EFL teacher has the advantage of tapping into an established subject area to find a theme or topic for the sequential art project. If the EFL program is self-contained or an independent institution altogether, researching issues that touch upon the students' lives should be part of the syllabus-building phase anyway. To find new themes for this particular project, newspaper articles, conversations in the cafeteria, public announcements, and, most importantly, the students themselves are good places to start.

While it is not necessarily a good idea to have all groups tackle the same topic, there are advantages to having different groups deal with the same theme through different stories. The theme of bettering one's country's educational system, for example, can rally the entire class to identify different issues and to explore solutions from a variety of angles. This will add to the depth and breadth of knowledge about a theme for the entire class, especially when the final products are shared. It also fuels a shop-and-share approach as the projects are progressing, encouraging students to discover ways in which the variations on a common theme are inter-related.

To ensure ownership of the project, student groups should be tasked with specifying their topic, within a given theme, and putting it into a local context. Whether it's the absence of after-school recreational space in a neighborhood, the lack of textbooks and other resources in school, or the shortage of universities for a country's high school graduates, there is an abundance of topics on any given theme. The more specific and local the topic, the easier it will be to deal with, especially with younger students. Firsthand knowledge of a brother or cousin who could not enter the university despite a relatively high score on a national entrance exam, for example, is better material for a story than a table with statistics. And the fact that a group of after-school mates has to interrupt their street game of soccer every time a car goes by will add tenfold to better grasping the issue of neighborhoods lacking play-space. If this stage of the project is managed correctly, the result will be a thesis statement with a few colorful examples.

Step 4: Researching the topic

It is important to set specific deadlines for each of the next four steps as they could easily go on for days, if not weeks. This is not necessarily a bad thing, especially if students are busy learning and using the target language. But teachers and students alike generally appreciate a time line for the project. As a rough frame of reference, a class that meets three hours a week can work through the entire project in about four weeks, assuming some of the work can be assigned as homework. The research phase should last about one week, with students beginning by debating among themselves some of the more fundamental questions at play:

1. What are the key problems? What are the causes?
2. What are the various points of view on the issue? Who is behind each of these opinions?
3. What are some of the ways in which the key problems can be solved?
4. Have any of the solutions been attempted? Why or why not? Are there any negative consequences to these solutions?
5. Who stands to benefit most from each solution? Who benefits from not having the issue addressed at all?

Armed with some possible answers, and hopefully with even more questions, the students should decide among themselves who will investigate what. One possible division of labor is to have specific students be responsible for obtaining information from neighbors, government offices, businesses, and so on. All group member should tap into more widely available sources of information, such as newspapers, books in the community or school library, if one exists, and the Internet.

A viable approach to the research is to have students investigate a group of questions related to one specific aspect of their topic. With the topic of a resource-strained school, for example, one student can research historical changes in the availability of resources while another looks at future plans. A third group member can investigate the teachers' current needs. Some degree of overlap is natural and should be perceived as a way of strengthening the story.

Step 5: Developing the story

At the risk of oversimplifying the structure of a story, and with reckless disregard for culture-sensitive genres and the work of many best-selling authors, there are three basic parts to most stories: a beginning, middle, and an end. Sequential art is no different. The beginning sets the scene, familiarizes the reader with the characters, and introduces the problem, issue, or concern. The middle is usually a series of episodes or adventures, often presented as hurdles or difficulties that need to be overcome. These episodes add detail and substance to the story and flesh out the characters' ideas and personalities. The ending is the climax, where the problem is resolved, for good or for bad. To certain kinds of stories we can also add a moral or coda to the ending. This helps place the problem in a larger context and gives the reader food for thought.

Fictionalizing a topic of social concern is no easy task. But it can be made easier by localizing the events, using familiar characters, and allowing the students' imaginations to explore a variety of scenarios. Once the topic is chosen—let's take the environment—and localized—the Aral Sea, for those of us living in Central Asia—the group needs to find a storyline, or plot. As background for the story, student research should have already generated the following general information:

> *The **Aral Sea**…is a landlocked sea in Central Asia. Since the 1960s the Aral Sea has been shrinking, as the rivers that feed it were diverted by the Soviet Union for irrigation. The Aral Sea is heavily polluted, largely as the result of weapons testing, industrial projects, and fertilizer runoff before and after the break-up of the Soviet Union.* (Wikipedia 2007)

Familiarity with fiction and the ability to think creatively are usually all the students need. A good group brainstorm, together with some input from the teacher, if even necessary, might help the group come up with the idea of some friends unwittingly going on a fishing trip to the Aral Sea. Or the story could be about a family member who has been away in Russia for many years and decides to return to her hometown, a village that used to be near the shore of the Aral Sea. Students should be thinking about the various problems that could present themselves and about how the characters will react to each of these problems. There could be bad weather, health issues, or a disingenuous bus driver. These hurdles should help shed light on the main social concern. They should also give the characters reasons to interact and talk, simultaneously breathing life into the story and the characters. In short, the group members' imaginations should be allowed to wander while keeping in mind an overall message.

Sequential art lends itself to stereotypes and allows students with basic drawing skills to build a personality with a few symbols rather than through a detailed drawing. A pair of glasses can represent someone who has studied long and hard. A large belly can represent a character with a more relaxed approach to life. And in Central Asia, a man with a white beard can represent truth and wisdom. In his superb book *Making Comics*, Scott McCloud (2006) recommends basing characters on certain well-known formulas: the stereotypes of the classic hero with superhuman powers and the villain with a penchant for dark magic; Jung's four types of human thought—intuition, feeling, intellect, and sensation; the four elements of earth, air, fire and water; astrological signs; the four seasons; historical figures; and favorite animals. To these I would add the personalities of famous people in the students' native culture and the group members' own personalities.

With a strong story and characters, an ending should emerge with considerable ease. Surprises add to the appeal of a story but are not essential. Subtle twists often work just as well. The fishing buddies might pull out THE last fish of the sea (appropriately labeled in the panel) and the girl who has returned to her village, now miles from a sea that once

provided a livelihood for all, might find comfort or a fighting spirit in wise words from her grandmother, one of the few remaining villagers.

Step 6: Structuring the story

The group now needs to fit the story into panels and write an accompanying script and captions. For teachers and students just beginning to work with this art form, I recommend three A4 pages doubled over to create a 12-page booklet. This makes a front and back cover with 10 pages in-between. Each page (half of the A4 sheet of paper), can be divided into four equal quarters, each of which will become a panel. I recommend adding a space between each panel—known as the "gutter"—as that adds to the visual appeal of the book and allows for one to fit in larger amounts of text in the form of speech bubbles, thought clouds, and captions. Be sure to leave a larger outer margin for the binding. This is usually just a few staples down the folded middle and should be the last step in the book-making process.

The front cover includes the title, authors, and a catchy visual. This is often an enlargement of one of the more attractive panels in the story, so it can be decided upon after most of the artwork is finished. The back cover should contain a short summary of the story that piques the readers' attention but avoids giving away the ending. It does not need to have artwork on it, but it will be more appealing if it does. A picture that offers only the scenery from one part of the story works best. Again, this could be an enlargement of one of the panels, with text in the place of the characters.

Page 1, the inside front cover, is known as a "splash" page and is usually one large panel that introduces the characters and establishes the setting. A caption often helps provide some background information about the story. If one sticks to four panels per booklet-page, pages 2 to 9 should have a total of 36 panels. They will contain the plot and climax. To cut down on the total number of panels, and to add visual variety, consider having students experiment with one wider or longer panel by bringing two panels together. To gain a sense of how the story will fit into the panels, all students should draft a panel-by-panel map, or outline, of the story. Chilcoat (1993) recommends introducing students to the following structure for each panel:

Scene/Panel 1, 2, 3 and so on...
- Narrative: (general description of the panel)
- Dialogue:
  - Character 1:
  - Character 2:
- Caption:
- Scene: (visual description of scene)

This brief description of each panel will allow students to adjust or re-write parts of the story before the artwork begins. It is also a good place to conduct a round of peer editing. Feedback from a number of readers will help the group determine whether they need to re-think any aspect of the story or the position and choice of any of the panels. This is also the time and place for the teacher to give feedback on the language used in the dialogue and caption. If the booklets are to remain in a classroom library for other students to read, it is worth having the students work on polishing certain aspects of the language and on inserting expressions that are appropriate to the level of the students. The idea is not to correct every single mistake or reshape the text to the teacher's liking, but to turn the language into a slightly more refined form so that it becomes a learning tool for the group and for future readers at that language level.

Step 7: Adding the artwork

Often one group member excels at drawing, or "penciling." This is a positive circumstance and is one of the reasons groups are formed in the first place. However, all students need to be included in the artwork phase of the project. One way of doing this is to have the artistically challenged students "pencil" easier objects, add detail to characters and objects, or work from images or models provided by the group's artist. Less demanding alternatives include tracing over the penciled sketches with ink, "inking" in the world of sequential art, or coloring in the sketches, unless you opt for a simple black and white approach. All students can "letter" the speech bubbles, thought clouds, and captions.

To help cut down on the need to start all over again, make sure students do not begin "inking" a page until speech bubbles, thought clouds, and captions have been "penciled" in.

This stage is also the best time at which to conduct a second round of peer editing that focuses on the artwork of the story. Groups should share their sketches with one another and be encouraged to comment on the clarity and effectiveness of the drawings, the visual representation of the characters, the connection between speech and character, the choice of the panels to tell the story and convey a message, and the visual cohesiveness of the overall story.

Once students have critiqued the drawings and agreed upon which ones to include, it is advisable to photocopy, if possible, each "penciled" page before students begin "inking." Photocopy again, if possible, before the pages are colored. This way the team will have back-up originals in case a mistake is made.

Rather than having the students do their artwork directly on the three stapled A4 pages, it is easier to have them work with half sheets of A4 paper or even smaller precut panels and then glue them into a stapled booklet of blank pages. There are several advantages to working this way. First, you avoid the confusion of having to keep in mind which page follows which when working with whole sheets of paper. Second, it avoids doing artwork on the back side of a page with other artwork, something that can prove messy and distracting to a reader depending on the quality of the paper and the ink. Third, it adds extra weight to the finished product, giving it more durability and the heavier feel of a book. Finally, it provides the option of displaying the entire story on one large poster board instead of, or before, converting it into a book. This is an important advantage, as we will see in Step 8.

The panels in most English language comic books and graphic novels are read from left to right, starting with the top row of panels. Speech bubbles, thought clouds, and captions within each panel are read in the same way—left to right, top to bottom. This should be "discovered" by students when they answer question six in Step 1, "Exploring sequential art." Students need to follow this convention when creating their artwork in order to avoid confusing the reader. (The only exception I have come across in English language sequential art is "native manga," which maintains the authentic Japanese format of right to left pagination and speech bubble order. However, the English text, for obvious reasons, is read left to right.) Despite any native language reading and writing conventions, students should adopt the English language convention of reading left to right in pagination, speech bubble order and, actual text. Once they have perfected the art form, students may want to try being more adventurous. For example, some students with whom I worked created a reader's-choice approach to plot sequence; they had the reader skip to different pages based on a decision the reader had the characters make.

Many students may try to avoid being involved in any way with artwork, especially if they feel it can lead to embarrassment. The teacher can encourage students by working closely with the school's art teachers on the project, if that is an option. The teacher can also tap into a variety of online resources that take students step-by-step through the sketching of people, objects, and scenery. As with language learning itself, it is critical that teachers show some sense of risk-taking themselves. Trial and error, mixed with a sense of humor and a healthy dose of courage, are usually enough to get students beyond a simple stick-figure approach to characters.

Several alternatives to drawing offer different approaches to the visual nature of the project. One of the simplest solutions is to trace characters from a magazine, book, or newspaper. The resulting realism can often have a humorous effect. The disadvantage is that if there is only one perspective of the character, and the character appears in three or more panels, it can be monotonous for the reader and the artwork can begin to lose its appeal.

More creative solutions involve avoiding human characters altogether and personifying objects or using symbols to represent those characters. In the Aral Sea story, homes, rivers, and even rocks could be main characters. Doonesbury, a popular comic strip in the United States, has successfully used punctuation marks and a cigarette with arms and legs as characters. Another possibility is to use pictures of people from magazines or newspapers and to fill in only the background with students' artwork and text. And yet another approach that has worked well is to have stu-

dents take photos of themselves posing as the story requires, gluing the photos to the page, and then adding speech bubbles. For those teachers with computers and basic graphics software, scanned drawings or photos can be touched-up, cropped, and arranged on a page with inserted speech bubbles and thought clouds. Yet another idea is to make a series of panels on the wall or floor and to then fill them with life-size outlines of the characters and have students color them in and add speech bubbles.

Step 8: Sharing the finished product

Ensuring a sense of audience from the very start is an important part of any successful writing process. (Before beginning Step 1, teachers will want to tell students what will happen in Step 8.) Knowing their audience motivates students, stimulating interest in their topic and ensuring a higher regard for quality in their work. It also maximizes the language learning experience: students like to read and discuss the work of peers. In this project, the added graphic dimension of sequential art makes the finished product that much more appealing.

In order to create a visually stimulating experience for all students, Bryan, Chilcoat and Morrison (2002) recommend a trade show in which each group displays their work. The half A4 size pages can be mounted on a poster board, or even directly taped to the wall, for all to see. Students then move from story to story, taking notes on their favorite artwork, characters, scenes, quotes, and overall stories. They should also jot down questions they have for the groups. The teacher can provide a handout with evaluation criteria or write the criteria on the board to help guide this process. Once this viewing phase is done, each group discusses its work in front of the class and answers questions.

The booklets can be shared with other classes as well. One of my English language teaching colleagues sets up a "Comics and Graphic Novel Fair" every year in his school; at the fair, students' creations are circulated and rated by a slightly younger group of readers. As students know this from the start, one of the goals of the story-writing process is to try to create a storyline and characters that appeal specifically to younger readers. The younger audience writes comments about each work, choosing best stories, favorite characters, funniest lines, and the most interesting scenes. The school's administrators are invited to hand out awards for the works that have generated the most interest, and a small contribution from parents helps publish the winning works.

Another follow-on project is for the students to act out their stories. Sequential art lends itself well to dramatization because it already contains visual cues and a script. In fact, several graphic novels have already served as storyboards for films, including Harvey Pekar's brilliant *American Splendor*. As speech bubbles are usually not enough to support the story entirely, students should be encouraged to add additional lines and scenes in order to fill in any gaps in the storyline. Stories that jump often in time and space, as is the case with some graphic novels and comic books, usually require more effort. One possible twist to this activity is to have other groups act out the story and then have the original artists or other student groups rate the actors' interpretation of the story. A simpler approach is to have other groups use the story as a roadmap for an oral re-telling of the story.

Collecting and preserving the students' stories should be one of the teacher's main goals. A shelf or bookcase of the students' creations in the classroom will naturally attract students and will motivate them to create high quality books, especially if they realize a younger brother or sister might read their book in the future. The teacher can set up a classroom library with the works, assigning them as reading outside of class. The booklets also serve as writing models when new groups of students begin working on new projects.

Another important step is to share the social concerns that have been addressed in the stories with the school community as a whole. If an integrated approach to the curriculum has been taken into consideration from the beginning, with the topic fitting into a general theme that is being covered in one or more other subjects, then there should be an opportunity to make the artwork and story part of a larger display at school. A school newspaper, wall board, and website are a few ways to showcase students' work and bring attention to the issue. The neighborhood may have an art gallery or community center that

can also display the work. Finally, it is also worth considering using work and research that has gone into the sequential art project as a foundation for more sophisticated writing projects such as newspaper articles and even grant proposals.

Conclusion

The idea of using pictures to tell stories in all likelihood predates the Altamira cave drawings made 14,000 years ago. The invention of the alphabet gave us a more efficient way to convey ideas, often relegating graphics to the role of supporting illustrations. While there are excellent examples in the history of art of both literary and graphic forms merging to tell a story, including the elegant Japanese "Ehon" illustrations and the Soviet children's picture books of the 1920s and 1930s, none of these forms "superimpose…the regimens of art (e.g., perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax)…upon each other" (Eisner 1985, 8) in the same way that graphic novels or comic books do. Sequential art presents us with a unique blend of the representational, or art itself, and the abstract, words. It captures human movement and communication on a page, in the here and now, unlike any other art form or medium.

Sequential art offers students a powerful tool with which to express themselves. Whether "noodling," a combination of note taking and doodling (Cary 2004, 146), creating a three-panel cartoon to contextualize a newly learned idiom, or creating a short graphic novel to address a social concern, the art form should play a central role in the learning of a language, native or foreign. It can be as simple as putting pen to paper or making sketches on the wall or blackboard. It can be as sophisticated as posting episodes of a story on a website or self-publishing a book. In short, sequential art is an accessible learning tool requiring the very minimum of a drawing tool, a space on which to draw, and one's imagination. "No matter how many tons of ink we've spilled on it over the years," Scott McCloud explains, "comics itself has always been a blank page for each new hand that approaches" (2006, 252). The eight steps presented above should serve as an introduction for filling in many blank pages and for filling students with an enhanced understanding of the target language, the target language culture, their own culture, and critical issues in the rapidly changing world around them.

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Continued on page 21

tic about using the language for real, personal purposes through these materials has sold us on this idea. We realize that, ironically, the most valuable and overlooked resource in education may be sitting right in front of every teacher. While teachers scramble to make and collect materials and try to imagine how students will react to them, an easily accessible and reliable source of material walks in and out of their classrooms every day. But now you know. So go ahead—make a book with your students. And prepare to be enthused!

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Student Storytelling… David Fay

(Continued from page 11)

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www.fundoodle.com
www.unclefred.com
www.ababasoft.com/how_to_draw/

Comics for social action
www.worldcomics.fi/home_about.shtml

Manga
www.emi-art.com/twtyh/main.html

Online comics
www.comics.com
www.thecomicportal.com
www.marvel.com
www.comics.org

Student-made Comics
www.amazing-kids.org/index.html
www.dubuque.k12.ia.us/Fulton/Cartoon_Club/cartoonists/

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Appendix 1 Student Profile Questions for Middle School

Students as Textbook Authors • Hsiao-yi Chou, Sok-Han Lau, Huei-Chia Yang, and Tim Murphey

The Story of _____ (your name)

My name is _____.
I come from _____.
My favorite subject in school is _____.
My favorite sport is _____.
I like to _____.
I like to _____.
I like to _____.
I don't like to _____.
I don't like to _____.
I don't like to _____.
When I grow up, I would like to be a(n) _____.
I think learning English is _____.
I have been in Hawaii for _____.

Draw any picture you like.

[This was the bottom half of an A4 sheet.]

Appendix 2 Ways to use a student-produced booklet

1. Students read their own page silently, then out loud to a partner.
2. Students describe their drawings.
3. Students read their classmates' pages by changing the subject of the sentence (e.g., *My name is _____. His/her name is _____.*).
4. Students use teacher's model of how to transform stem sentences to ask questions of other students (e.g., *What is your name? What do you like?*).
5. Students ask about their friends' drawings (*What's that?*).
6. Students look at the photo on the back of the booklet with their partners and try to name all of their classmates.
7. Students describe a classmate in the photo, and the partner tries to guess who the person is.
8. After thoroughly familiarizing themselves with the contents of the booklet, students describe someone's likes and dislikes, and their partners try to identify the person—if necessary, by referring back to the booklet.
9. The teacher chooses one of the students' profiles, reads some sentences from it, and has students guess which student was described.
10. Students show their families their booklets and the next day share with the class their families' comments (e.g., *My mother said she liked____. My father said he liked____.*)