

CBLDF Presents: She Changed Comics: The Untold Story of the Women Who Changed Free Expression in Comics

Higher Education Teaching Guide

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I. Introduction

Teachers across areas of study and throughout education levels have increasingly included comics in their curriculum. Before comics were integrated into classrooms, there was a hesitation amongst educators and parents that comics would somehow hinder language development and literacy. This criticism was countered with analytical evidence that comics do not, in fact, inhibit access to new vocabulary. “According to read-aloud specialist Jim Trelease (2001), to become proficient readers, people need to master a set of about 5,000 ‘rare words’ that appear frequently in conversation. In the average adult novel, these words appear 52 times per 1,000 words of text. In comic books, they appear 53 times per 1,000 (Hays & Athens, 1988).”¹ This and other research led to K-12 educators welcoming comics as valued literature capable of capturing not only resistant young readers’ and English Language Learners’ attention but also students who learn visually in general. Beyond visual learning and the complex reading experience that comics provide by way of dynamic text-image relationships, comics can be used within higher education institutions to promote new ways of storytelling, to push the boundaries of critical thinking, and to creatively disseminate critical texts and information.

Over the years, texts on the subject of comics have poured into our mainstream shelves in bookstores, libraries, and digital shops thus finding their way into the hands of audiences from all demographics. The texts range from comics theory such as the popular *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud to the scholarly work in *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis. Other texts have won the prestigious Eisner Award, such as *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* by Frances Gateward and John Jennings, a book that explores the implications and societal effects of comics through the lenses of power, inclusion, and representation. Trina Robbins’ text *Pretty in Ink: North American Women Cartoonists 1896-2013* documents history of comics to move women creators from the margins into the established North American comics cannon. One of the newest texts, *She Changed Comics: The Untold Story of the Women Who Changed Free Expression in Comics*, takes the exploration of women in comics one step further. *She Changed Comics*, presented by the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and edited by Betsy Gomez, highlights women from America but also women along the fringes and women from across the globe: women fighting political persecution for their artwork, women unifying intersectional feminist theory with young adult artwork and narratives, women challenging the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal status quo of popular comics from Marvel or DC. This book is a tool that can be implemented in curricula that examines many areas of study including art history, literature, writing, ethnic studies, women’s or feminist studies, queer or sexuality studies, political science, and more.

1. Newkirk, Thomas. “Media and Literacy: What’s Good?”. *Educational Leadership*, September 2006.

II. University Student Learning Outcomes

She Changed Comics can assist students in reaching various learning outcomes. Some specific examples follow.

Sample learning outcomes from San Jose State University’s English and Comparative Literature Program:

- » Read closely in a variety of forms, styles, structures, and modes, and articulate the value of close reading in the study of literature, creative writing, or rhetoric.
- » Show familiarity with major literary works, genres, periods, and critical approaches to British, American, and World Literature.

- » Develop and carry out research projects, and locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate information effectively.
- » Articulate the relations among culture, history, and texts.

Sample learning outcomes from UC Berkeley's Gender and Women's Studies Program:

- » Intersectionality: Analyze gender as it intersects with other relations of power such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, geography, ability, and age; distinguish universalist understandings of gender, women, and sexuality from multi-dimensional analyses that recognize interconnectivity and mutual constitution of categories.
- » Gender issues: Recognize the social, political, economic, national, and cultural dimensions of gender as these relate to disparities in power and privilege. Become familiar with a range of past and present major issues pertaining to gender, such as race and citizenship, reproductive and sexual politics, media representation, understandings of masculinities and femininities, racialization of gender and sexuality, women's enfranchisement, gender and violence, identity politics, immigration, sex discrimination, changing families, gender and environment, labor, language, health disparities, gender and science, histories of colonialism, nation-state formations.
- » Historicization and contextualization: Articulate differences in sociopolitical contexts that inform opinions, theories, identities, subcultures and politics pertaining to gender and sexuality. Discuss issues of gender and sexuality in the context of their specific histories, knowledge frames, and politics. Work flexibly with a variety of epistemological approaches, recognizing each as culturally specific and inherently limited.
- » Research Skills: Produce or locate resources and learn to build a research agenda. Read broadly in order to develop well-focused projects, using primary and secondary sources. Delineate key points in scholarly articles and respond to them. Use different modes of research, including empirical methods, scholarly literature, and theoretical and artistic engagement. Develop advanced library skills tailored to specific research projects, including facility with electronic databases, bibliographic reference materials, archival documents, and image and sound repositories.
- » Interdisciplinarity: Draw from multiple fields of study or define new fields; grasp means and significance of expanding, crossing, transgressing, or bridging disciplinary boundaries.

Sample learning outcomes from California College of the Arts' Diversity Studies Program:

- » Gained an in-depth understanding of issues, traditions, and/or themes arising from the history, culture, and present condition of diverse communities, particularly the historically underrepresented, immigrant and forced-migratory communities of the United States.
- » Learned to question traditional disciplinary boundaries and their underlying assumptions as well as the relationship of social/political institutions to literature, art, and cultural practices.
- » Fostered an understanding of the material and social conditions of contemporary life in the United States as they intersect with the global community.
- » Learned to question traditional disciplinary boundaries and their underlying assumptions as well as the relationship of social/political institutions to literature, art, and cultural practices.
- » Implemented skills in creative problem solving and applied them to critical social issues.

III. Preparation

While comics have gained widespread popularity and finding someone who has never read any form of graphic narrative (including comic strips) is increasingly difficult, some students may still benefit from a quick introductory study of 1) what comics are, 2) how to analyze them, and 3) the ages of comics.

A. Working Definitions of Comics

The definition of comics has shifted and evolved over time. Will Eisner used the term “sequential art” to describe art that uses images in sequence to tell a story or communicate information (Eisner, 1985).² Years later, Scott McCloud adapted this definition into “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (McCloud, 1994).³

It is generally agreed that comic books are not a genre but a medium. There are comic books that tell stories that fall into the following genres: narrative non-fiction, fantasy, young adult, science fiction, horror, poetry, biography, and so forth.

Comics can be created within a team (writer, penciler, inker, colorist, editor, publisher) or on one’s own. Many comics creators, like several featured in *She Made Comics*, did not have a division of labor and instead fulfilled all of these roles on their own.

The organization of information within a comic book typically follows this order: types of lines within panels, composition of images and text within a panel, composition of panels within tiers, composition of panels and tiers within a page (including page turns), and composition of the entire book. Everything from the speech balloons to the borders and gutters communicate information.

While anyone can pick up a comic book and dive into a story, it may help to understand some of the key concepts that the women featured in *She Changed Comics* utilized and even rebelled against in order to tell their stories as best as they could. Comics has its own set of vocabulary that apply to the text and image, as well as overlapping vocabulary shared with classic literary devices.

2. Eisner, Will. *Comics & Sequential Art*. New York: Poorhouse Press, 1985.

3. McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

B. How to Analyze Comics

Analyzing comics can be an academic feat considering all the literary and art theory that can be found on a single comics page. A good starting point is familiarizing students with comics vocabulary, literary devices, and art styles.

Comics Vocabulary and Literary Devices

Comics-specific vocabulary:

caption: a section of text that contains either narration or a voice of a narrator. They are sometimes called narrative blocks, boxes, or staging balloons. They can also provide information like a change of location or time.

emanata: lines and symbols that communicate unsaid thoughts or experiences of the characters (e.g.,

bubbles around a character's head to connote inebriation or ray-like lines shooting from a character's head to connote shock).

gutter: the space between panels. Gutters are often used to communicate lengths of time.

panel: a drawing on a page typically framed by borders that contains a segment of information.

sound effect: word that communicates a sound accompanied with an action in a panel or on a page (e.g., BANG, CRASH, POW).

speech bubble or balloon: a section of character dialogue typically framed with its own border in a panel and containing a tail to indicate which character is speaking. Balloons may also contain thoughts (often denoted with tail of progressively smaller circles), sound effects, and narrative information.

Literary Devices Found in Comics

Nearly all classic literary devices are present in comics. Below are some of the common devices that can be found in comics across the ages.

characterization: the step by step process wherein an author introduces and then describes a character directly or indirectly through actions, thoughts, and speech.

conflict: a resistance that the protagonist of the story finds while attempting to achieve her goals or dreams. Conflict can be brought about from external factors or from within the Self. Conflict typically follows one of the following formats a) characters in conflict with one another, b) characters in conflict with their surroundings, and b) characters in conflict with themselves.

flashback: the occurrence of specific events communicated to the reader that have taken place before the present time of the narration or the present time that the narration is following. These are commonly used in comics to show backstory, dreams, memories, and so forth.

hyperbole: specific words, phrases, or images that exaggerate or overemphasize ideas in order to produce a noticeable effect. Hyperbole can add drama or fantasy to a comic.

onomatopoeia: words that are spelled closely to the sound they depict. Sound effects are the most common usage of onomatopoeia in comics.

personification: the practice of attaching human traits and characteristics with non-human objects, phenomena, and animals.

plot: the sequence of events and happenings that make up a story. It is the outcome and order of the story.

tone: the perspective or attitude that the author adopts with regards to a specific character, place, or the story in general. In comics, tone can be expressed in art style, the line expression or mark-making, colors, word choices, and so forth.

Art Style

An understanding of art history and theory can make a comic reading experience more fulfilling but

certainly is not required to fully analyze, or even enjoy, comics. Below are some questions to consider when students are confronted with the challenge to critique or explore the works by those featured in *She Changed Comics*.

- » How has the creator organized her panels? Her pages?
- » How do you know that the page is successful? Is the intended order clear?
- » What about the artwork helps communicate the tone?
- » What other artworks might have influenced the work?
- » What information is included on each character design? Are there gender-specific pieces of information? Race or location specific? Is there information missing?
- » What information can be found in the backgrounds to indicate time periods, political atmospheres, etc? Why would the creator include this?
- » What has the creator done to help readers focus their attention on characters or actions?
- » What is the significance or effect of the creator's choice to implement a cartoon/abstract/realistic style?

C. Comic Ages

Much like the categorization of art and literature based on methods and themes across time, comics, too, can be categorized as such. Typically, comic creators and comics historians identify these categories as the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze Age, and the Modern Age. Included in *She Changed Comics* are additional categories that might historically overlap with other ages, especially the Silver and Bronze Ages: Mangaka, alternative comics / independent comics, and underground comix.

1. **Golden Age (1930s-1950s):** The precise timeline of this age is often disputed. Some historians have documented that during this time, more girls were reading comics than boys (Robbins, 1999).⁴ This age is characterized by characters who were career-oriented, romance heroines, and teenagers. Pre-Golden Age and Golden Age creators featured in *She Changed Comics* include:
 - > Nell Brinkley (1)
 - > Marjorie Henderson Buell (3)
 - > Grace Drayton and Margaret G. Hays (5)
 - > Edwina Dumm (7)
 - > Ethel Hays (9)
 - > Helen Hokinson (11)
 - > Dale Messick (13)
 - > Tarpé Mills (15)
 - > Rose O'Neill (17)
 - > Jackie Ormes (19)
 - > Lou Rogers (21)
 - > Barbara Shermund (23)
2. **Silver Age (1960s-1970s):** The Silver Age is characterized by the mainstream success of comics

in America. Superhero comics took off during this period. Representation of women was discouraged, specifically by DC Comics, but women as supporting characters and women creators still flourished. Creators featured in *She Changed Comics* in this category:

- > Ramona Fradon (25)
 - > Marie Severin (27)
 - > Hilda Terry (29)
 - > Claire Bretécher (59) **also falls under Alternative Comics*
 - > Underground Comix (1960s-): characterized by small press or self-published comics that commented on social issues. They often utilized satire. Many depict themes that were forbidden in mainstream comics by the Comics Code Authority. These themes included drugs, sex, and different forms of violence.
 - > Lyn Chevli (31)
 - > Joyce Farmer (33)
 - > Shary Flenniken (35)
 - > Roberta Gregory (37) **also falls under Alternative Comics*
 - > Aline Kominsky- Crumb (39)
 - > Lee Marrs (41)
 - > Diane Noomin (43)
 - > Trina Robbins (45)
 - > Dori Seda (47)
 - > Melinda Gebbie (69) **also falls under Alternative Comics*
 - > Dorothy Woolfolk (113)
3. **Bronze Age (1970s-1980s):** The Bronze Age is characterized by creators who incorporated feminist concepts born from different feminist movements; often, these depictions of feminism are imperfect in their communication but demonstrative of the struggles of feminism. Creators featured in *She Changed Comics* are listed below, and most are still at work today. Some also fall into the subcategory of alternative comics.
- > Lynda Barry (51) **also falls under Modern Age*
 - > Roz Chast (61) **also falls under Modern Age*
 - > Louise Simonson (87) **also falls under Modern Age*
 - > Jenette Kahn (107) **also falls under Modern Age*
4. **Modern Age (mid 1980s-present):** The Modern Age is characterized by more psychologically and emotionally complex themes. Creators during this time dramatically shifted the comics industries.
- > Alison Bechdel (55)
 - > Barbara Brandon-Croft (57)
 - > Kelly Sue DeConnick (85)
 - > Gail Simone (89)
 - > Fiona Staples (91)
 - > Jill Thompson (93)

- > Karen Berger (105)
- > Diana Schutz (111)
- > Cece Bell (121)
- > Sophie Campbell (125)
- > Kate Leth (127)
- > Noelle Stevenson (142)
- > Raina Telgemeier (148)
- > G. Willow Wilson (154)
- > Alternative Comics:
 - > Jessica Abel (49)
 - > Kate Beaton (53)
 - > Sue Coe (63)
 - > Colleen Doran (65)
 - > Julie Doucet (67)
 - > Phoebe Gloeckner (71) **also falls under Underground Comix*
 - > Carol Lay (73) **also falls under Underground Comix*
 - > Wendy Pini (75)
 - > Marjane Satrapi (77)
 - > Ariel Schrag (79)
 - > Posy Simmonds (81)
 - > Jillian and Mariko Tamaki (83)
 - > Françoise Mouly (109)
 - > Atena Farghadani (115)
 - > Doaa Eladl (117)
 - > Lena Merhej (130)
 - > Kanika Mishra (133)
 - > Spike Trotman (151)

5. **Mangaka (possibly pre 1900s-present):** *Mangaka* is the Japanese word for a manga artist. Manga is a style of comics that originates from Japan. Since manga overlaps with all the other age categories and were formed and informed by histories quite different from Western histories, they are listed here as artists instead of being categorized by themes or time period.

- > 24 Nengumi (95)
- > Rumiko Takahashi (99)
- > Moto Hagio (101)
- > Machiko Hasegawa (103)
- > Rokudenashiko (119)

4. Robbins, Trina. *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999.

IV. Suggested Lesson Activity

Goal: Expose students to the lives and careers of women comic creators throughout history as well as facilitate a close examination of their work.

Outcome: Students will have critically analyzed the relationships between diverse women comic creators and the historical time periods that influenced their work.

Fields of study: interdisciplinary; gender and women's studies, ethnic studies, comparative literature and creative writing, history, queer studies, etc.

Materials needed: *She Changed Comics*, printed samples of the chosen creators' work, pens, paper, Powerpoint or other presentation program.

Preparation: Instructor must prepare the slides and questions before class. Students read *She Changed Comics* before activity.

Style: Part lecture, part discussion and group work

Total time: 1.5 hours; 90 minutes

Class size for this example: 15 students

Activity

1. Instructor shows a brief Powerpoint presentation on six women comic creators: Jackie Ormes, Lyn Chevli, Atena Farghadani, Kanika Mishra, Campbell, Spike Trotman. (20 minutes)
2. Instructor breaks class into three groups (5 students per group). (2 minutes)
3. Each group is designated two comic creators. (2 minutes)
 - > Group 1: Jackie Ormes and Lyn Chevli
 - > Group 2: Atena Farghadani and Kanika Mishra
 - > Group 3: Sophie Campbell and Spike Trotman
4. Instructor hands out one excerpt or short story of each comic creator's work (2 per group). (2 minutes)
5. Groups designate roles for each member. (5 minutes)
 - > One notetaker: records discussion points and brainstorming notes.
 - > One facilitator: manages and directs the discussion.
 - > Two co-presenters: showcases the group's findings during the final section of the activity.
 - > One ambassador: serves as communication between the groups.
6. Instructor presents the following questions in a Powerpoint slide. (3 minutes)
 - > What are the similarities between these two comic creators? What are their differences?
 - > What are the relational implications of the time periods in which they worked and the

art that they produced? How are their messages communicated through their art? How were their lives or careers affected by the events of those times? What barriers have they faced or challenged? What risks did they take?

- › How would you judge the success of their art? Their cultural impact? Is any of the work relevant to your lives or communities? How did their work galvanize the energies or zeitgeist of the time?
 - › Why did they make their respective artistic choices? Was there urgency or necessity fueling their choices? How is this evident in their art? What devices and techniques were implemented to solidify or support their stories?
7. The students work within their groups to reach conclusions collectively and create a thesis statement unifying or contrasting the two assigned comic creators. *(40 minutes)*
- › Students discuss and gather ideas as managed by the facilitator.
 - › Students develop a thesis statement using notes from the notetaker.
 - › Ambassadors travel to the other two groups to share their thesis ensuring that no two theses are identical or too similar in nature.
8. The group presents work. *(10 minutes)*
- › Co-presenters from each group move to the front of the class. Co-presenters take turns sharing their group's thesis statements and how they reached their conclusions.
9. Question and answer discussion. *(6 minutes)*
- › Students submit answers and final thesis statements.

V. Interdisciplinary Studies

She Changed Comics can be applied to different disciplines and can even bridge several disciplines. While there are many possibilities, below are suggestions for possible connections found in the book:

Connection to History or Political Science

Students can research the various wars, political or legislative upheavals, and notable events that influenced the lives and work of the creators:

- » World War I & II
- » The Vietnam War
- » The Civil Rights Movement
- » Women's movements and the fight for women's reproductive rights
- » 9/11 and Islamophobia
- » Capitalism and the use of cartoons in advertising

Connection to Gender and Women's Studies

Students can research the terms that were born from Underground and Alternative comics and the terms that explored these complex topics with great attention and care:

- » Androgyny
- » The Bechdel Test
- » Discrimination
- » Empowerment
- » Feminine Mystique
- » Guerilla Girls
- » Herstory
- » Intersectionality
- » Marginalization
- » Women's Suffrage
- » Gender roles
- » Patriarchy
- » Rosie the Riveter
- » Sexual Harassment
- » Womanism
- » Sexuality

- » Rape and assault
- » Resistance

Connection to Queer Studies

Students can research the ways in which some of these creators used comics as a way to combat or advocate for (and in some cases developed by way of comics) the following:

- » Sexuality and gender
- » Intersectionality
- » Identity and representation
- » Art making spaces as safe spaces
- » Artist collectives
- » Empathy
- » Homophobia
- » Cisism and Cisnormativity
- » Subcultures
- » Queer spaces
- » Gender expression and gender identity
- » Transphobia
- » Heteronormativity
- » Heteropatriarchy
- » Spectrums

Connection to Ethnic Studies

Students can explore the ways in which various societal events influenced the visibility or invisibility of some of the creators (e.g., the irony of Jackie Ormes' comics being cut from the newspapers to cover the growing Civil Rights Movement). They can also examine the ways comics have been used to teach complex theories and experiences of race. Critical race theory terminology is not explicitly stated in all of the creators of color's work, but conversations and lessons on the following are possible in analysis:

- » The Civil Rights Movement, MLK, and The Black Panther Party
- » Muslim Immigration and Islamophobia
- » Diversity and Inclusion
- » Intersectionality
- » Bigotry and discrimination
- » Multicultural Competency

- » Ethnicity
- » Systems of Oppression
- » Collusion
- » Colonialism
- » Power
- » Privilege
- » Multiracial experiences
- » Representation

Connection to Comparative Literature or Creative Writing

Students can study literary devices found in these comic creators' works the way one would study a novel or book of poetry. **See section III. Preparation*

Additionally, students can explore new and innovative directions that literature is branching into (e.g., comics-poetry, comics anthologies featuring short stories told through the medium of comics).

Connection to Art Theory

Students can look at the history and development of art theory through the lens of comics while also looking at the media that helped shape comics.

- » Cave paintings
- » Pictograms
- » Icons and totems
- » Etchings and carvings
- » Fine art
- » Photography
- » Graphic design

Other disciplines and areas of study: psychology, sociology, criminology, cultural studies.

VI. Pedagogical Resources

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dom: ethics, democracy and civic courage. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

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Broude, Norma, and Mary D. Garrard. 1992. *The Expanding discourse: feminism and art history*. New York: IconEditions.

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Pizzino, Christopher. 2016. *Arresting development: Comics at the boundaries of literature*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

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About Comic Book Legal Defense Fund

Comic Book Legal Defense Fund is a non-profit organization protecting the freedom to read comics! Our work protects readers, creators, librarians, retailers, publishers, and educators who face the threat of censorship. We monitor legislation and challenge laws that would limit the First Amendment. We create resources that promote understanding of comics and the rights our community is guaranteed. Every day we publish news and information about censorship events as they happen. We are partners in the Kids' Right to Read Project and Banned Books Week. Our expert legal team is available at a moment's notice to respond to First Amendment emergencies. CBLDF is a lean organization that works hard to protect the rights on which our community depends. For the latest news and to access our full archive of resources, please visit www.cbldf.org

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