

## MEDIA WORKSTATION

# Using cartoons and comics in lessons

*Gorg Mallia*

“The best resources are culled from the world of the learners themselves, as these can be used to bridge the gap between outside and inside the classroom”

The teacher's store of resources is not unlimited, but there is more than enough to go round, depending on the resourcefulness of those who look for teaching aids in all walks of life and not just in the obvious books and resource centres.

The best resources are culled from the world of the learners themselves, as these can be used to bridge the gap between outside and inside the classroom. Children often make a very clear cut distinction between what happens in their “real life” and their “school” life. Teaching methodologies that harp too much on the academic tends to corroborate this artificial division. Even homework is considered by young students to be an extension of the “school”, separated by a wall of attitude from, say, watching animated cartoons on television or going out to play with friends.

The closer the teacher brings the two worlds together, the better the chances of negating an attitude regarding school that hinders enjoyment and, as a direct consequence, learning.

### The language of cartoons

A very important presence in the life of

young children is that of cartoons. Their participation is colourful and direct, painting a picture of reality with broad but simple brushstrokes that have their own codes - simpler than language codes and the more complex visuals of photo-realism, but nonetheless ones that need to be learnt.

Gombrich (1960), speaking of the pioneer comic artist Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846), describes the line drawing of the cartoon as “purely conventional symbolism. For that very reason it is immediately intelligible to a child, who might have difficulty in disentangling a naturalist painting.” (p.286). The gaps in between the lines are filled in by the mind of the seer, what can be described as *closure*: “when the eye completes a line or curve in order to form a familiar shape” (Arntson, 1998, p.77). A reading of what Gestalt psychology says about the matter is worth the resourceful teacher's while. Simplification in design in visual perception is also directly related. Arnheim (1974) is, of course, suggested reading in this area.

What is important is that “the cartoonist radically “levels” what we usually see in our perceptual field. ... Even the outline is usually simplified, with the cartoonist dropping needless objects and details. If possible, the cartoonist does not use two lines where one

*The Marvel cast of superhero characters. Ever since the beginning of the 1960's, the American company Marvel Comics, under the leadership of Stan Lee, has created a Universe populated with “superheroes with human problems”. Foremost among their characters is Spiderman.*



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line will do.” (Harrison, 1981, p.57).

So reality is simplified. Happenings caricatured. The simplicity communicates directly, and the caricature cues perfectly the point to be made.

For most children, cartoons are animated. They do understand that there are also static cartoons, panels and strips, but the animated cartoons, closely associated as they are with television, are what really attract them. The exceptions that prove the rule are comic strips about characters that eventually found themselves on the small screen - characters like those in Charles Shulz's *Peanuts*, and Jim Davis' *Garfield*. The same can be said for the inverse, i.e. animated cartoons done as static strips, as in the case of most of Disney's more popular characters, like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and the others.

Even so, it must be admitted, that comics are not as followed by children as they used to be, say, twenty years ago. The most popular comics coming to Malta from Britain (*The Beano*, *The Dandy*, and others from the Dundee firm of D. C. Thomson) only sell a fraction of what they used to, and this slump in children's comics sales seems to be an international one ... inversely proportional, I might add, to a skyrocketing in the sales of comics for adults. Gone are the days when comics “were guaranteed to be non-serious literature, specially suited to children” (Barker, 1989, p.8). There are similarities in the language of both the adult and the juvenile comic, but the great distinction lies in subject matter and treatment (Mallia, 1997). Comics that are still extensively followed, if only for their links with

merchandising and, again, the screen both small and silver, are superhero comics, and these mostly by older children.

## Using cartoons in lessons

What is important to the teacher is to know that Batman (D.C. Comics), Spiderman (Marvel Comics), Tom and Jerry (MGM), Bugs Bunny (Warner Bros.), Snoopy (United Features Syndicate) and quite a few others are already known to students. Much better known, I might add, than real live people, or even fictitious ones developed in verbal and not visual print. Any lesson in which these characters and their stories (be they print or animation) are used is likely to draw more attention and responding than one which uses textbook or rote characters created for the occasion.

We have fed the cognitive domain for too long and only that. We need to start thinking of the affective domain and ways of reaching the former through it. Not that (for example) comics should be relegated purely to the affective side of the learning fence as seems to be indicated by textbook designers like Hartley (1994). “Clearly the affective role of instructions is to the fore in comic strips: their aim being to attract and motivate less-able learners.” (p.87). Research I carried out some years back indicated that comics can be as effective in the cognitive domain as in the affective, and subjects can be taught through the use of the comics format just as well as through an illustrated textbook, and decidedly better than through non-illustrated textbooks (Mallia, 1994).

**So how can cartoons and comics be used in lessons, and should their use be relegated to well-known characters from the genre?**

To answer the second first: no. Depending on the subject being taught, cartoon resources can be found. For example, historical detail and happenings can be “lived” by the student from the biased point of view of the cartoonist who commented on the times being studied. Logically, the teacher needs to do his/her groundwork with the students before they are exposed to the cartoons, but once students know what to expect regarding bias and context, the cartoon should prove a stimulating as well as mnemonic resource. A number of dissertations have been written by Education undergraduates over the past years that can offer the teacher a number of ways of utilising cartoons in history teaching. Among these one can mention Azzopardi (1995) and Deguara (1997). Copies of these and the useful workbooks they present as part of their research can be found in the Melitensia section of the University of Malta library.



The DC comics stable of superhero characters, including the first popular superhero, Superman (here in his latest incarnation), and such stalwarts of the genre as Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, Aquaman and Green Lantern.

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Political cartoons are also extremely useful as ways of educating youngsters about the workings of society. "They, at their best, encapsulate some very complex issues, different viewpoints and some of the contradictions which are a real part of many situations. Political cartoons do not simply take sides, they offer a challenge to us all." (Regan, Sinclair & Turner, 1988, p.4).

Comics and animated cartoons can carry language, as well as stimulus to thought and conversation in their narrative and development. Both have been used professionally in the past as means to an information-oriented end ... even negative ends, Cuban intellectuals accused Walt Disney of using Donald Duck as a way to instill imperialism into the minds of non-Americans (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971). Disney also has shorts on the basic concepts of mathematics, and Warner Bros have even outlined economics in a Sylvester short. The large comics companies of America have lent both their characters and comic books in aid of social awareness campaigns (smoking, drugs, child abuse, etc.). All have been very effective, which just goes to show what a powerful tool comics and cartoons can be in the hands of the teacher who can tailor the product to his or her own (as well as the students') needs.

In this brief paper, I have

only spoken about the potential inherent in cartoons and comics to be used as part of lessons. I have not gone into many details as to how individual lessons can use comics and cartoons. I have no doubt that resourceful teachers can think of a number of ways of doing so ... once they have convinced themselves of the worth of this resource.

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## TEACHING AND ASSESSING YOUNG LEARNERS OF EFL

edited by

Charles Mifsud & Gorġ Mallia

Throughout these last few years there has been considerable interest in the area of Teaching English to Young Learners. Especially so as in a number of countries, like those of Eastern Europe, English has taken the place of other foreign languages. Many countries have introduced the teaching of English as an additional language from an early age. Also, much thought has been given to the issue of assessment in the specialist area.

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