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THE COMICS AND INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD

W. W. D. Sones

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, it is said. A good many teachers, not all, of course, believe that figuratively speaking it is a good way to his mind. The point here, of this bit of folk wisdom, is that modern developments in the area of popular entertainment have made contributions to educational method. In recent decades, invention and technology have developed motion pictures, the radio, and, latterly, the comic. The first two have already been harnessed to the purposes of education. It is appropriate to examine from the standpoint of educational method this most recently arrived entertainment device that has attracted such an extraordinary following. Any form of language that reaches one hundred million¹ of our people naturally engages the attention of educationists, whose major activity is communication.

Since 1935, the birth year of the comic magazine, also the beginning of the period of extraordinary multiplication of the newspaper comic strip, the comics have evoked more than a hundred critical articles in educational and nonprofessional periodicals. Most of these have dealt with the sociology of the comics; that is, problems of ethics or problems of taste under the guise of ethics. But in the last three years there has appeared an increasing volume of literature dealing with the relations of the comics to education and educational method. This study will be limited to an exploration and analysis of this area.

Paul Witty² and associates studied the content of the reading of comics among 2,500 children distributed throughout the school grades. He found that they were read by almost all of the children

¹ William Moulton Marston, "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," *The American Scholar*, XIII (1943-1944), 1.

² Paul Witty, "Children's Interests in Reading the Comics," *Journal of Experimental Education*, X, 100-104.

in the middle grades, with somewhat decreased popularity on the senior-high-school level. These findings support the statement of the publishers that 95 per cent of children 8 to 14 years old, inclusive, and 65 per cent of the 15- to 18-year-olds read comic magazines. The reason for the children's interest in the comics was studied by Reynolds³ and by several other investigators. In response to the inquiry, "Why do you like the comics?" it was found that the children's replies, "Like the stories" and "Easy to read," appeared with almost equal frequency.

These facts have two implications for instructional method. The comics call forth an activity common to most school children, and they employ a language that apparently is almost universally understood. It is generally admitted that instruction must begin in the on-going activities and concerns of the learner and that its effectiveness depends on the efficiency of the form of communication that is employed. Both of these relations with instructional method have been used as a basis for classroom practices by various teachers.

Many of these experiments have been in the field of language, and on the level of the middle grades and junior high school. Harold Downes,⁴ instructor in English in Lynn, Massachusetts, Industrial Arts High School, with the assistance of the publishers of the Superman-D. C. Comic Magazines, prepared a workbook in language. This is a laboratory guide in English study involving vocabulary and word meanings, language interpretations, identification of language forms, and other aspects of language study. Mr. Downes and others who have used the device reported unusual interest on the part of the pupils using it, but that it presented the annoying difficulty of causing the youngsters to complete a whole week's work in one evening! Another study carried on in a summer workshop at the University of Pittsburgh identified some twenty-five

³ George R. Reynolds, "The Children's Slant on Comics," *School Executive*, LXXII, 17-18.

⁴ Harold Downes and Robert L. Thorndike, *The Superman Work Book* (New York: Juvenile Group Foundation, 125 East 46th Street).

different classroom uses for selected comic magazines. Perhaps of chief importance among these were their use in remedial reading instruction. Teachers in other subject areas also suggested possible uses. The following quotation from the report of the study⁵ is of interest:

In individualizing and personalizing instruction the comic book has possibilities for certain types of pupils. There are the so-called slow readers. . . . Usually this is a child who is older than the average of his group. For these children there is a dearth of suitable reading material available on the upper grade and junior high school levels. What is available may fit the pupil's reading ability but not his reading interests. For many of these children comic books provide practice material that is needed. . . .

There is also a large group of children which teachers frequently classify as non-academic. It includes the whole range of abilities from dull to bright. This group is bored and sometimes rebellious when the formal school subjects are presented in a formal way. . . . Sometimes the language, geography, history and science that are included in the text of the comic book are so vitalized in the story that this kind of pupil can be led to further work in these academic fields. . . .

There is also the unsocial type of pupil for whom the comic book may be a remedial instrument. Psychiatrists have reported that this type of child very often lets off his steam in the reading of a comic thriller.

In general, both newspaper and magazine comics are produced for the purpose of popular entertainment. That the comic magazine would be pointed in the direction of instruction was a natural development. Mr. M. C. Gaines, its originator, also the discoverer of a leading comic character, "Superman," originally was a schoolmaster. He recognized the effectiveness of the picture continuity technique and developed "Picture Stories from the Bible" with a view to instruction as well as popular interest. The publication is having wide use in Sunday-school instruction and has already reached a circulation of best-seller proportions. He is now publish-

⁵ W. W. D. Sones, "Comics in the Classroom," *School Executive*, LXI, 31-33.

ing serially "Picture Stories from American History" pointed both to popular and school instruction.

Other publishers have developed comic magazines that are designed to be entertainingly instructive. Two of these publications are the magazines, "True Comics" and "Real Life Comics," in which biographical and adventure stories are taken from real life and presented in pictorial form. Another publisher has abbreviated and pictorialized various pieces of classical literature which are published in the magazine, "Classic Comics." Among these pictured classics are: *Tale of Two Cities*, *Ivanhoe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and other classical titles that are a part of the regular English curriculum in literature. It is reported that all these publications are used in classroom activities. History, geography, and science have been prepared in comic-strip form and presented in *Junior Scholastic*, a current-events magazine for school children.

Perhaps the widest current educational use of the picture or cartoon continuity is in military instruction. The comic character "Li'l Abner" is instructing new soldiers in military courtesy, safety, and other elements of basic training. "Joe Palooka," syndicated also in service newspapers, is said to be effective in influencing behavior and morale. Similar use of the picture continuity for educational purposes is being made by the C.I.O., Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, and the East-West Association.

The reading of comic magazines as an indicator of the reading interests of junior-high-school pupils has been used by a number of English teachers as a starting point for classroom studies in the field of literature. Harriet E. Lee,⁹ using newspaper and magazine comics brought in by her pupils, developed two English units of work entitled, "Working With the Cartoonists" and "Magazines." Analytical and comparative studies were made. The children tried their hands at developing cartoon sequences, studied the narratives and the implications, and, finally, derived standards of quality and value

⁹ Harriet E. Lee, "Discrimination in Reading," *English Journal*, XXXI, 677-678.

through group discussion. Kinneman⁷ used this same procedure, which led to the formation of reading lists in the whole field of literature that would provide the same satisfaction as did the comics. The classes of Beryl K. Sullivan⁸ analyzed the comic stories and discovered that they were to be distinguished by being "short in content, interesting, intriguing, and illustrated." As a result of this judgment, "the teacher placed in her room a wide variety of books, magazines, and papers; they covered the main interests of the group from sewing and the making of model airplanes to mystery and adventure."

The variety and extent of usage of the picture continuity in instruction suggests the need for a technical analysis of this communication device in relation to instruction and learning. When taken apart the picture continuity has the following features: the narrative is presented in a sequence of pictures or cartoons; the focus of the narrative is always on people and rarely departs from the central character; animation is effected in the succession of pictures; sensory appeal usually is heightened by the use of colors; attention is held by brevity; finally, the theme and story are humanized to deal with popular feelings, thoughts, and actions. Each of these structural elements caters to the popular inclination, in reading activity, for vividness, action, brevity, and personalization. Perhaps the latter, the personal and human elements, because of identification and empathy, explains the moving influence of the medium.

The modern picture continuity improves on primitive picture writing in that it supplements representation with textual additions of description, dialogue, even reflection. Picture and text are not only complementary, but frequently parallel. In relation to language structure, Thorndike⁹ found that the typical comic magazine con-

⁷ Fleda C. Kinneman, "Comics and Their Appeal to the Youth of Today," *English Journal*, XXXII, 331-335.

⁸ Beryl K. Sullivan, "Superman Licked," *The Clearing House*, XVII, 428-429.

⁹ Robert L. Thorndike, "Words and the Comics," *Journal of Experimental Education*, X, 110-113.

tained about 10,000 running words of reading matter with 92 per cent of the wordage among the most common 1,000 in the Thorndike Word List, a fraction less than 6 per cent distributed throughout the remainder of the list, and a fraction more than 1 per cent not included. He estimated the level of difficulty of the reading matter as being fifth to sixth school grade. Hill¹⁰ studied the vocabulary of a large sample of comic strips and found that their vocabulary was somewhat less difficult than that found by Thorndike for comic magazines. He made a special study of the language vulgarisms and found that 5 per cent of the words might be classified as slang, phonetic spelling, and onomatopoeia. Thorndike concluded that the amount of wordage and the character of the vocabulary gave the juvenile reader valuable practice in the reading art. Hill's opinion was that the number of "word distortions" was not sufficient to influence language habits undesirably.

Frances Heene¹¹ studied the ideational content of the comic strips as also did Lawrence Kessel.¹² Both of these were based on comic strips appearing in Chicago daily newspapers. These two writers arrived at divergent interpretations. Kessel was disposed to condemn the popular social "assumptions" that were portrayed or implied in the strips, while Miss Heene, from the angle of a librarian, was disposed to take a more tolerant view appraising the strips as reflecting current popular thought and feeling. However, both recognized the comic strip as a part of the current social scene and inferred that even with its questionable features it might be used for educational purposes as object lesson material.

From the standpoint of structure and content, therefore, it appears the newspaper comic and the comic magazine can be appro-

¹⁰ George E. Hill, "Word Distortions in Comic Strips," *Elementary School Journal*, XLIII, 520-525.

¹¹ William S. Gray, editor, *Conference on Reading*. The University of Chicago, Supplementary Educational Monographs, No. 57, 1943.

¹² Lawrence Kessel, "Some Assumptions in Newspaper Comics," *Childhood Education*, XVIX, 349-353.

priated for several different kinds of instructional activities. These usages may range from "horrible examples" serving as starting points to lead to the discovery of finer literary, language, or art forms, to their use as vehicles to realize the purposes of the school in the improvement of reading, language development, or acquisition of information. However, conceding such possible uses, what if any would be the gains over instructional instruments that are now employed?

Thus far there exists but a small amount of experimentally derived evidence concerning the effectiveness of the picture continuity in instruction. The present writer carried on an exploratory study to determine the relative effectiveness of the pictorial continuity in relation to printed text in learning factual information for immediate recall. The life and work of Clara Barton was presented in picture continuity in the comic magazine "Wonder Woman" which, in reprint form, was made available for experimentation by the publishers. The story in textual form was copied from the pictured form. About four hundred children in sixth and ninth grades were divided into sixteen matched groups by grade and by three intelligence levels—lower, middle, and upper. The dividing lines for the latter were I.Q. 91 and 111. In each pair one group was presented with the picture continuity form and the other with the printed text form of the narrative. The reading was followed immediately by an objective test on the content. One week later the procedure was reversed and the groups retested by the same test. A strong trend in favor of the picture continuity was indicated by the two sets of results. In the first testing for all but one of the picture groups the mean score was from ten to thirty per cent higher than the paired printed text group. In the second testing all of the eight groups who first read the printed text made significantly higher improvement in scores than did the paired groups who first read the picture continuity. Mean scores of the experimental and control groups on the second test were parallel. In other words, the picture groups seemed

to have learned almost as much as they were capable of learning from their first reading while the groups reading the printed text first had not reached the saturation point, but did so by a second reading in the picture form. Furthermore, while the brighter children learned, for immediate recall, practically the same amount from either picture continuity or printed text, the results favored the picture continuity for the low and middle intelligence levels.

Even in the absence of extensive scientific data as to the relative effectiveness in communication of the picture continuity, there is important supporting evidence from other sources. Circulation figures in themselves are important data. The extent and content of the fan mail received by the creators of popular comic strips as reported by Milton Caniff, Ham Fisher, and others reveals the moving influence of the medium. And, finally, advertisers experimenting with the picture continuity form in comparison with the conventional text form are reported as getting unusual results.

The explanation of the effectiveness of the picture continuity is far from complete at this time. The opinion of Marston¹³ follows:

Strange as it may seem, it is the form of comics-story telling, "artistic" or not, that constitutes the crucial factor in putting over this universal appeal. The potency of the picture story is not a matter of modern theory but of anciently established truth. Before man thought in words, he felt in pictures. Man still prefers to short-cut his mental processes by skipping the laryngial substitutes and visualizing directly the dramatic situations that rouse his emotions. It's too bad for us "literary" enthusiasts, but it's the truth nevertheless, pictures tell any story more effectively than words.

Another line of evidence may also have bearing on the problem of how and why the picture continuity is effective in communication. This would deal with the capacity of people to master the art of reading. On this point, Gray¹⁴ makes the following statement:

As indicated by studies of the readability of books, at least half of our

¹³ Marston, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Gray, *op. cit.*

population is unable to read any of the printed material above the mid-point in the range of difficulty. In terms, therefore, of the reading material available, it may be said that as a nation we are far less than fifty per cent literate.

On the other hand, Marston,²⁵ making computations from the circulation of daily and Sunday newspapers featuring comic strips and from the circulation of comic magazines, concluded that, "One hundred million is a very conservative estimate of the total number of men, women, and children who habitually read story-strips in the United States today." The difference between these figures may well be a measure of the relative effectiveness of the two forms of communication.

An assumption implied in most school instruction is that all children will read the printed materials with equal effectiveness. This is indicated by the current practice of attempting mass education through the medium of a common textbook. The absurdity of this practice is patent. Since all the children of all the people are to be found in school even on its upper levels, then of course there is the same wide range in reading competency as is indicated in the figures above. This points to the necessity of making the same adjustment in the forms of communication used in school as is developing in the popular press for adults.

²⁵ Marston, *op. cit.*

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