Teaching narrative writing using comics: Delainey and Rasmussen, the creators of Betty, share their composing strategies as rich literacy resources for elementary teachers

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Abstract

The author explores how comics texts and writing practices are rich literacy resources for educators. Few studies report on how teachers explore such texts and practices in their classrooms. The author examines how drawing improves students’ narrative writing and presents findings from a 7-month case study of Delainey and Rasmussen’s collaborative composing routines. Delainey and Rasmussen are the creators of the daily syndicated comic strip, Betty, an internationally published family comic strip that has been in newspapers for 20 years. The author explores Delainey and Rasmussen’s collaborative routines and composing practices and provides parallel suggestions for classroom work.

Key words: collaborative composition, collaborative writing, comic strips, comics practices, comics texts, comics writing, multimodal composition, multimodal texts

Introduction

Comics texts and writing practices are rich literacy resources for educators, but little recent research reports on how elementary teachers explore such texts and practices in their classrooms (Bucky Carter, 2008). In this article, first, I review the benefits of students using both print and visuals to compose narrative texts. Second, I consider how to make comics writing practices visible by introducing Gary Delainey and Gerry Rasmussen’s daily syndicated comic strip Betty and their collaborative composing routines. I suggest that these have implications for elementary teachers in teaching narrative writing in comics form.

Drawing improves students’ narrative writing

Young children (5–7 years old) often draw pictures and write words to compose their stories (Barrs, 1984; Bearne, 2009). The use of two symbol systems affords them two ways to make meaning, so when one symbol system does not work, they turn to the other. Barrs (1984) found that by the time students were 9 to 10 years old, it was less likely that teachers encouraged them to use pictures while composing stories, and they frequently got mired in linguistic rules and narrative problems. Caldwell and Moore (1991) randomly assigned 9 and 10 years olds to either the drawing group, which allowed students to draw while planning stories, or to the non-drawing group, which did not allow students to draw while planning stories. The children who drew produced more sophisticated stories than those who did not.

There are several reasons why drawing is thought to support students’ narrative writing. First, very young children draw pictures that mediate their communication with parents and other adults, so they enter school ready to use both symbol systems (Dyson, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Second, students tend to inhabit their story worlds when they draw and write during planning and drafting because the two symbol systems afford them two ways to ‘in-dwell’ (Barrs, 1984) or immerse themselves in their early composing processes. Such immersion means that children are more likely to take the time “to think about the processes involved in finding ideas, composing and expressing meaning, rather than being hustled from one skills based task to another” (Marsh and Millard, 2000, p. 61). A third reason is that children are exposed to narrative texts that rely upon metafictive devices (e.g., highly interactive characters and narrators) that require the reader to understand the interplay between pictures, words, narratives and space. Bearne (2009) provided an in-depth view of how young writers quickly rose to the challenge of composing their versions of such complex narratives when provided with the opportunity to incorporate visuals and print. Substantial research confirms her point that students write mature and complex narratives when they are taught what such visual and linguistic devices do and how they work together in...
picture books (Dresang, 2008; Mackey, 2008; McClay, 2000; Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe, 2008).

Recently, an elementary school principal asked, “Could you help our children get past that cookie-cutter story writing produced for exams?” She was referring to the prototypical ‘introduction-problem-three attempts-resolution’ style of planning narratives that is advocated in a plethora of professional resources. It is logical and natural that teachers turn to planning approaches advocated in professional literature, so it is imperative that academics write about planning such as drawing that is easy to do and is associated with high-quality narrative writing. Dyson (1986) reported on how Rachel, a 5-year-old girl, was engrossed in drawing a story and telling about it as it unfolded; her story ideas came from her drawing of made-up characters, settings and/or events. Calkins (1986) told a similar story about a 5-year-old boy named Chris who sketched in the form of doodles all over his page until he eventually stopped and started writing; such an iterative, reciprocal composing process for both Rachel and Chris shows how children weave details and thoughts from one medium into another to create a whole text. In my dissertation study conducted with five grades 3–6 teachers, I found that most 8- to 12-year-old students drew as part of their story writing process, and they indicated that drawing helped them to generate story ideas, add details to their drafts and to get them out of a writer’s block moment. Such drawings were often inspired by or connected to popular movies, television shows, comic strips and books and video games.

Frey and Fisher (2004) introduced high school students to a narrative writing project that allowed students to draw, write and take digital pictures to create comic books. They admitted: “Having begun with the idea that graphic novels were comic books at best and a waste of time at worst, we now realise the power they have for engaging students in authentic writing” (p. 24). Comics “refers to the medium itself, not a specific object” (McCloud, 1993, p. 4), and the medium is “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 20). There are countless recent examples of creators who have published exemplary award-winning comics that are widely appreciated by all age groups: graphic novels (e.g., Jeff Smith’s Bones), wordless comics (e.g., Anthony Runton’s Oatty), comic books (e.g., Runton Jimmy Gownley’s Amelia Rules), comic strips (e.g., Patrick McDonnell’s Mutts), memoirs (e.g., David Small’s Stitches), classics (e.g., Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland), non-fiction (e.g., Robert Crumb’s Illustrated Book of Genesis), picture books (e.g., Anthony Browne’s Voices in the Park, David McCauley’s Black and White), wordless picture books (e.g., Raymond Briggs’ Snowman) and autobiographical how-to books (e.g., Scott McCloud’s (2006) Making Comics, Linda Barry’s (2008) What It Is). However, educators internationally have traditionally referred to comics as poor-quality literature (Sabin, 1993). Versaci (2001) noted that “many adolescents…see comic books as adults do: subliterate, disposable and juvenile” (p. 63). Part of the problem is that ‘comics’ are regularly inaccurately equated with comic books (Ayers and Alexander-Tanner, 2010), which makes comics practices invisible.

Making comics writing practices visible to teachers and students

The best way to make comics practices visible to teachers and students is to take seriously Meek’s (1988) pronouncement that “texts teach what readers learn”. After stockering the classroom with good examples of comics texts, it is important to understand how they work. To assist with that process, I present my findings from a 7-month case study of Delaney and Rasmussen’s comics composing practices. I integrate examples and my analysis of such examples from the data collected: artefacts (sketches, notes, comic strip drafts and publications, literature referenced by the creators) and four transcribed interviews (11 h). I provide an overview of Betty and Delaney and Rasmussen’s collaborative approach to creating their daily strip, and I describe Delaney’s writing and Rasmussen’s drawing practices and emphasise that their approach is one amongst many ways of teaching comics writing. I conclude with implications for how to work with students to compose their own narratives in comic form.

Background on Betty. Betty is a popular comic strip about family life that began as Bub Slug in the Gateway, the University of Alberta newspaper, in 1976, and then in the Edmonton Journal from 1985–1989. In 1991, United Features syndicated Bub Slug as Betty to refocus public attention on Betty. The comic strip is published in newspapers internationally (Brunei, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, United States), in a book compilation called Betty (Delaney and Rasmussen, 1999), on http://www.comics.com for universal and free access, and it is especially loved in its comic book format in Sweden. Harvey (2009), a renowned comics scholar, reported on their work to exemplify how comic strips such as Betty reflect what is hot in popular culture globally.

The comic strip world of Betty takes place in the urban setting of a middle-class family with three main characters who associate with a limited number of recurring outside characters. Betty and Bub are a middle-aged married couple who have a teenage son, Junior. Betty is a strong, forward-thinking, articulate female who has worked as a movie reviewer and sports columnist and who is now portrayed mainly as a wife and mother. Betty is conservative and cautious
compared to her best friend, Alex, who stays abreast of the latest fashions, fads and cutting-edge technology. Bub is the everyday workingman who is more passive than Betty; however, he periodically surprises her with his charm and insight. The characters’ intrinsic qualities are revealed through their daily interactions organised around weekly themes (e.g., using the newest technologies).

Background on Delainey and Rasmussen’s collaborative composing strategies. Delainey and Rasmussen began syndication with a development contract to create 1 month of comic strips in 6 months. Delainey associated working collaboratively with selecting a right- or left-handed hockey stick:

Transcript (21 September 2009)

There is a question that every parent has when their kid is playing hockey—’What kind of stick should I give my kid, a left stick or a right stick?’ And the answer is just hand them a stick. The way he grabs the stick to start with is exactly how he should be holding the stick. For us, who writes, who draws, that was how it was—Somebody threw us a stick, Gerry started drawing it, and I started writing it and that is how the partnership works.

Throughout the development contract, Delainey and Rasmussen engaged in a visioning process by working side-by-side where they jointly imagined what the strip was going to be about. They focused on the main characters and discussed, sketched and listed ideas for each one. For Betty, they sketched how she dressed, what she liked and did not like, how she spent her time (her roles and hobbies), where she lived and what her relationship was like with Bub, Junior and her best friend.

Rasmussen commented on how they had to keep narrowing superfluous ideas about, for example, the neighbours, and get to the essence of who each character was. Delainey emphasised how “nothing is wasted” – the sketches, notes, doodles, organisers, story plans or whatever the writer does to think matters. For example, the Sunday strip on 9 March 2010 (see Figure 1) was inspired by the following sketch done the month before (see Figure A2). His sketches of Bub Junior and Betty assisted him in formulating the first panels of the March 9 strip (Figure 2). Gary emphasised how it is not just the ideas that are used, but it is also the ideas that are not used that are instructive. Thus, he had imagined that Betty and Alex would be the main characters of March 9th Sunday strip and quickly realised that it was too forced (Figure A2). Thus, characters’ limits are only recognisable when the creators let their ideas run wild. Delainey and Rasmussen laughed when they shared how, at one point, the whole family had macaroni heads, and how, at another point, they had so many crazy neighbours that they lost track of who they were. I asked how they knew when to stop visioning, and Rasmussen explained, “I mean, I’ll throw ideas [potential themes] at him [Delainey], but he is acting like a filter now” (Rasmussen, personal communication, 18 September 2009). During the visioning phase, they experimented with where and how to work together. Initially, they worked side-by-side, but the fights that resulted and the inefficiency of their arrangement caused tension. “[W]e were working through every phase. We had tight deadlines and it was taking up a humungous amount of time; we had some awful fights” (Rasmussen, personal communication, 18 September 2009). They decided that Delainey would independently draft initial strip ideas and send them to Rasmussen who

Figure 1: 9 March 2010 comic strip.
completed them in a publishable form; they discussed revisions by phone and fax. “It was the pressure that we were putting on each other. It was clear that to make this work, we had to set boundaries” (De- lainey, personal communication, 21 September 2009). The boundaries worked because they had developed mutual respect and trust in each other and their process. “Trust is a biggie . . . you’re working with another artist who’s his own identity—what you have to do is just let the other person do their stuff” (Rasmussen, personal communication, 18 September 2009).

Implications of their collaborative visioning and composing process

Collaboratively composing: producing raw material and shaping it into a new form. Dewey (1934) compared human creativity to making wine. Just like juice flows from the raw material of grapes, “an act of expression is a squeezing out, a pressing forth” (p. 66) from the pressure created by boundaries. Delainey and Rasmussen decided to create possible strip ideas (raw grapes) by working apart (boundary). Tension prompted joint problem solving about how to make space for the “growth of raw ideas” (creativity/spontaneity) by setting boundaries (rules, technologies, deadlines). Such boundaries have been maintained for their 35-year working relationship, and both artists declared that without the rules, their relationship and the strip would fall apart.

Collaboratively composing comic strips with students. Students enjoy working collaboratively on even small exercises because they can share ideas and emotionally support each other, which facilitates creativity (Vass, 2007). McCloud (1993) had a pair drawing game that I have reworked based upon Delainey and Rasmussen’s collaborative routine. First, students who trust each other and enjoy working together find a location where they sit side-by-side sketching characters by each drawing different possibilities (i.e., they might each draw themselves or a character that they have drawn before or adapt one that they like from a favourite comic strip, book or novel). Then, they choose one character each and use those characters to brainstorm possible scenarios that the characters might encounter. Next, they engage in a comic strip drawing exercise that follows these rules: “I draw one panel and you either add to that panel or draw all or part of the next panel”. The rules are the boundaries that keep students focused on the story development (i.e., what should I draw next and how can I connect it with what went on before?) rather than on the quality of the drawing or writing. The students should be encouraged to ask each other for help to draw or to write certain parts of their composition. While I had success with such an approach during my dissertation study, it is important to reiterate that this is one possibility for approaching collaborative comics writing.

Delainey’s pre-writing and drafting process

The process of generating ideas for comic strips requires an understanding of the comic narrative and how it is driven by themes.

Understanding the comic strip narrative. Betty is a ‘proliferating narrative’ because “narratives of the micro-level become so invasive that they monopolize the focus of attention” (Ryan, 1992, p. 4). In a narrative where characters age, their biological lives are the macro-structure against which micro-narratives hold meaning. In Betty, the characters do not age and such a macro-structure is lost. Unlike a drama where readers become more attached to the character than to their vices, in comics, the reader becomes more attached to seeing how human vices work through characters (Bergson, 1911). “The profusion of stories told and the poverty of the global summary” (Ryan, 1992,
p. 5) is precisely what makes comic strip writing difficult. Thus, the global thread holding Betty together is the 19-year family saga told through characters that have been ‘connecting devices’ (Ryan, 1992, p. 5) to real-world themes. Themes are the macro-structure or centre around which the comic strip’s dynamic weekly narratives rotate.

Comic strip themes are intellectually slippery because they are socially, culturally, historically and geographically defined ideas about what is funny. Gary composes a daily comic strip by working with a myriad of pre-writing processes that bring him into contact with life themes (e.g., technology can complicate rather than simplify our lives). He also studies comic strip writing as a craft, especially the seminal theorist Bergson (1911). Bergson (1911) claimed, “The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human” (p. 2, emphasis in original). Thus, the principles of humour depict what it means to be human and are Gary’s ground for drawing up comic strip ideas.

Gary compares generating comic strip ideas with drawing water from a well. He shared his comic strip pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing processes in a flowchart (see Figure A1) and emphasised that his process constantly changes: “[E]verything changed since then [when I had asked him to keep his notes] because things always change. The well runs dry and you have to dig a new well” (G. Delainey, personal communication, 9 March 2010). Gary starts with a ‘preparatory phase’ when he does not already have a comic strip idea. In Figure A2, he spoke about one pre-writing strategy (“The Natural Planning Process”), which he used to complete the 4 April 2010 Betty Sunday strip (see the strip in Figure A3). In Part I (Purpose and Principles), he reviewed what he called “principles of humor” or “criteria for good comic strip writing” (Figure 3).

Based upon his re-reading of Bergson (1911) and Charles Schultz, in Part II, Gary’s vision was to not allow the sequential form of the medium become a limitation (Figure 4).

By Part III (Brainstorming), Gary used two pre-writing strategies, a chart and web (Figure 5), to construct the April 4 Sunday comic strip theme (technology often complicates tasks). He defined a theme as “something that pushes against us in our everyday lives” (Delainey, personal communication, 9 March 2010), and the April 4 strip theme evolved through his chart in a relatively linear way: (1) thinking about what people need (e.g., food), (2) imagining the complications that may arise while satisfying the need, (3) settling on one complication (confusion), (4) listing the sources of such a complication and selecting one of them (self-checkouts), (5) determining why people struggle with this complication (because self-checkouts are automated) and (6) using the reason that underpins why people struggle with such a complication as one way to think about other gadgets that cause people similar problems (i.e., GPS devices).

Gary’s chart was a means of ‘reifying’ (holding still) the theme, and such reifications (chart and web) were meditational devices because they “made [his thinking] into a thing” (Wertsch, 1998, p. 58); they created a point of focus around which Gary could return while drafting his preliminary comic panels (Figure 6 and A4).

See Appendix, Figure A4, the Sunday, 4 April 2010 comic strip that Gary sent to Gerry.
Seeing what is funny in everyday experiences. In real life, people exist in biological time where ageing carries its own meta-narrative with its many knowns (e.g., a biological beginning and end). In Betty, Bub and Betty remain middle-aged and Junior, an adolescent, so readers accept that the medium only reminds them of the real world. Characters experience daily events in an abbreviated narrative of a few panels; they do not have the intellectual time or space to deliberate over social norms or carefully planned courses of action. Betty, Bub and Junior regularly face situations that could be embarrassing, humiliating, upsetting or ridiculous in real life, but the situations lose their emotional weight in the strip. Bergson (1911) emphasised that humour depends upon the audience adopting the stance of “[the] disinterested spectator...[where] many a drama will turn into a comedy” (p. 3). For example, if a mother actually said this to her son, some people would think that she had humiliated him (Figure 7). However, “[t]o produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple” (Bergson, 1911, p. 1). The ‘comic intelligence’ is the capacity to sense reality in the panel while temporarily suspending real-world convictions.

The hardest part about working with everyday experiences is seeing what is unfamiliar about them. Gary explores new or unfamiliar writing practices to represent familiar ideas about people’s everyday experiences. He finds that new pre-writing practices mediate his capacity to re-see what is unique about everyday experiences. Mankoff (2002) described Gary’s goal as similar to his own as a gag cartoonist: cartooning requires a “counterfactual creativity...simultaneously
creating the real and the unreal, the possible and its opposite” (p. 70). “Cartooning creates revelry by making the incongruous congruous through creative logic” (Mankoff, 2002, p. 54). Gary’s creative logic is about seeing the unfamiliar in the familiar by re-seeing and re-presenting everyday experiences.

On 24 March 2010, Bub and Betty experience the familiar (the feeling of rain on their skin), and the reader realises that the familiar feeling is associated with an unfamiliar or unlikely, but still possible source (a dog) (see Figure 8).

The humour “rests on some sort of duality, contradiction or paradox” (Mankoff, 2002, p. 113). Gary’s exploratory pre-writing approach is his way of digging new wells or generating new comic strips about familiar life themes (e.g. love, technology). He experimented with concept mapping, charting (e.g. fishbone charts) and drawing his characters in different situations as examples. He iteratively reads, writes, draws and represents multimodally (using pictures, words and icons) to construct what is funny at a particular time and space in his life. Finally, when a pre-writing process is not working, Gary turns to television and reading the newspaper for inspiration.

Understanding Gary’s idea generation routines. Linda Barry (2001), a daily comic strip writer, explained how drawing from a well of ideas is like looking deep into one’s reservoir, “the place where we allow ourselves to become lost. Totally lost” (Bilger, 2001, p. 37). Gary explained how when his routine changes and family members are home, it is more difficult for him to create the state of mind he needs in order to get lost in his writing. Once such a state of mind is in motion, he avoids premature editing of ideas, a tendency that stresses him out and destroys good strip ideas. Barry (2008) blocks out her self-conscious editor that stands over her shoulder to let her know ‘what sucks’. Idea generation requires space and time to dig deep into the wells of one’s imagination and memory and to let what emerges fall naturally and quickly onto the page.

Barry “has to merge into a place convincing enough to give [her] experiences [to] write about” (Bilger, 2001, p. 38); “what they [people who do not engage in creative processes] don’t know is that creative work is going to lead them into the dark woods” (Bilger, 2001, p. 37). Gary shared how he has Betty say and do things that are completely out of character for her (e.g., swearing) to move past safe writing spaces. Barry defined risky writing spaces as ones where she is successful at cultivating a state of mind where she is both “focused and sort of absent-minded” (Bilger, 2001, p. 37). Since creativity happens while in such a state, Gary emphasised that story ideas coalesce from his review of his sketches, notes and doodles. Barry described visioning as a “slow-waiting-for-the-story-to come” time, and she has to keep sketching, doodling, moving and taking short breaks to move the story forward (Bilger, 2001, p. 40). Gary found that getting the idea for a strip is the hardest part and sometimes he has to stop and read the newspaper, strips he admires or watch TV in order to cultivate the idea generation process.

Exploring comic strip pre-writing with students. The idea generation phase is the most time-consuming and important part of the comic strip writing process. The big idea guiding this phase is to have students ask themselves: “What is pushing on us in our everyday lives?” (e.g., technology, time, too many things to do, etc.). If they start with a graphic organiser to begin answering this question, children need to know that the organisers are tools to think with. If the tool is not working, they need to explore other possibilities: sketching characters in situations where it is unclear what they will do (e.g., placing them in fire, an argument, a personal dilemma); listing a character’s likes, dislikes, personality traits and desires and webbing what happens when a character tries to satisfy a desire; using an everyday situation like grocery shopping and listing what happens when they are shopping; considering good and bad aspects of technologies in their lives; considering good and bad aspects about being the age they are. The key is to keep moving the story idea forward by actively thinking by doing something, allowing ideas to flow onto the page in rough form and not to worry about spelling, neatness or even political correctness. As Gary pointed out, the comic strip writing process is like any kind of creative writing: the tools are mental shovels for digging up ideas that are found in everyday experiences. Writers dig into such experiences from having lived them, read about them, heard or watched them. Therefore, students should expect to re-read their sketchbooks, favourite comic strips and magazines and newspapers to feed their reservoirs. Once they have dug up enough potential themes,
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students imagine what their characters would do in such situations that are illustrative of such themes. Hence, the drafting phase begins.

Drafting his strip ideas is about trying them on with his characters. Gary tests his strip ideas on his characters:

Transcript (10 March 2010)

[I]f you can actually listen to the character and what the character wants in a situation, then I end up with a real thing... Something that is funny and real as opposed to when I’m not listening and I am forcing the character in a direction I think is funny. Then I’m driving the character and not the character driving the strip.

Gary occupies his characters to imagine situations from their points of view (what they see, say, do, feel and think). It is a dialogical process of interacting as though he is part of the characters and apart from them. He experiments with strategies as meditational devices that facilitate such a back-and-forth stance between his reality and his characters’ reality. For example, on 12 February 2009, he began with a theme (what is happening has already happened) and then created two charts, one about his themes in his reality (Figure 9) and one about Betty and Junior and their characters (qualities, activities) and their relationship to each other (what is common and uncommon between them) with respect to the theme (Figure 10).

Such strategies are portals that permit Gary to slide out of the here-and-now and into the comic strip time space. His attention to what is happening inside the comic strip world requires him to compose without thinking about the act of composition. Therefore, he requires processes that are simple and easy; otherwise, the strategies would become objects of his attention as opposed to facilitators of his movement between such time-spaces.

Gerry’s drawing practices

Composing a comic strip is a heterochronotopic experience. Gerry and Gary compose the strip by acting as though they are one cartoonist; therefore, they inhabit a multi-faceted embodied time-space even though they work apart. “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to that intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Gary and Gerry function dialogically within and between three time-spaces or chronotopes: the real world, the characters’ world and their depictions of both worlds. Gary writes comic strips by considering what themes are “pushing on us” (9 March 2010) in the real world; what his characters will think, feel, say and do in situations based on such themes in their world; and what Gerry will do to visually depict his intention as a writer. Gerry is the first person who reads Gary’s script, and he reads it from three time-space perspectives. Hence, Bakhtin (1981) explained ‘heterochrony’:

[W]e get a mutual interaction between the world represented in the work and the world outside the work. This interaction is pinpointed very precisely in certain elementary features of composition...[They] lie in different worlds, in different chronotopes that can never fuse with each other or be identical to each other, but are at the same time, interrelated and indissolubly tied up with each other (p. 255).

Gerry traced his decision-making processes about how he independently thought about and collaboratively revised Gary’s December 27th Sunday comic strip (see Figures 11 and 12). I analyse such a process using the
Figure 10: Gary’s notes.

The construct of heterochrony and the three time-spaces outlined above.

Transcript (28 January 2010)

Rhonda: So do you think it would have been the same gag if you had left it the way that he had planned for it [Gary had Alex and Betty sitting down in a restaurant in the third panel in Figure 11].

Gerry: In a restaurant—No, it wouldn’t have been as good… that’s why I did it.

Rhonda: How did it change the gag?

Gerry: I think this [placing Betty and Alex in a busy shopping mall scene] made it way funnier.

Rhonda: What made it funnier?

Gerry: … [It] was… that the whole thing had an element of conflict in it and it gave me chance to stretch out and draw.

Rhonda: What was the conflict that he was going for as opposed to what you imagined?

Gerry: He was just wanting to contrast the idea of a nice holiday movie that was all just talk compared to what the reality of it is.

Rhonda: So he had the same vision.

Gerry: It was the same vision; it was just what the backdrop was. The backdrop to me was a lot funnier if they were having this conversation right in the middle of the mayhem going on around them.

Figure 11: 27 December 2009.
Gerry changed the strip to emphasise Gary’s intention of juxtaposing the rhetoric of what Christmas ought to be (spiritually uplifting and peaceful) against what it is (commercialised and hectic). The visual change intensified both the theme in reality and in the characters’ world. Thus, the act of collaboratively composing a comic strip is about each creator considering all three time-spaces, a heterochronotopic experience.

Students work as collaborative composers or editors. By applying Gary and Gerry’s collaborative revising and editing process, students have to answer three questions throughout their joint composing process: (1) What is pushing on us in the real world? (2) What would each of our characters do in this situation? and (3) What do we have to be able to draw and write so that another person can understand our strip? Students who write together should hand in character sketches (i.e., physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual characteristics) for each character in their proposed project, a one-page comic that they composed together, and individual reflections about how well they worked as a team. It may be preferable to engage in collaborative comic strip composing by creating peer partners who jointly edit and provide feedback on each other’s works-in-progress as opposed to jointly composing one comic strip or book.

Drawing a comic strip requires re-thinking what story writing is. Gerry defined comic strip writing as “writing with pictures”: “Any time you add something, it affects the writing, so if you are drawing...the scene and something grabs focus like let’s say I drew a kangaroo, then, all of a sudden, I am writing” (Rasmussen, personal communication, 28 January 2010). Therefore, comic story writing requires people to rethink how to compose stories: “The first stage with any kids trying to do this is that they want to start with words. What they don’t realize is that most of the words are not needed. If they start with pictures, then they realize what is needed” (Rasmussen, personal communication, 28 January 2010).
Working with students to draw comic strips. Gerry sets restrictions when he teaches students how to compose comics. For example, he asks students to make a simple strip that fits on one page and asks them to use pictures only. He requests that students think of each panel/frame as synonymous with a sentence or one idea. After completing one page, students meet with a partner who reads through the strip and asks questions when he/she does not understand a panel or how one panel moves to another. Such questions must be addressed by the student adding pictures, words and/or panels to clarify points of confusion. The key choices for adding words are to redraw the panel with speech bubbles, thought balloons or captions. If the child chooses to use speech balloons, then it is important to redraw the comic strip by first drawing the panels, then the text, and finally, the pictures. Students often discover that they do not have room for the words. The program, Comic Life, has many interesting panel shapes and students may choose to either work in the program with their scanned drawings or print the panels and then draw their strip. On a final note, make sure that students leave a 1 cm border around each comic strip page to prevent images and text from being inadvertently cut off once the page is copied.

Conclusion

Comic texts and comic strip writing practices and artefacts are rich literacy resources for teachers. In this article, I applied the rich strategies offered by Gary and Gerry and indicated that I had success with them. However, I have also indicated that I offer these ideas as one approach among many to teaching comics writing. Future scholarship is required on how comics are introduced to students, what exercises are most helpful to support their understanding of a new medium and how collaborative writing works best for students who agree to jointly create a comic strip or book.

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References


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Appendix

Figure A1: Gary’s flowchart of his writing process.

Figure A2: Sketches of Alex and Betty for 9 March 2010 comic strip.

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Figure A3: Sunday strip, 4 April 2010.

Figure A4: Gary’s draft of the 4 April Sunday strip sent to Gerry.