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2017

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Comic Book Project as a Tool for Teaching Multimodal Argument and Fostering Critical Thinking Skills: Implications for the L2 Writing Classroom

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One of my major responsibilities as Director of ESL Writing Program at Case Western Reserve University was to place incoming international students in the appropriate writing class based on their placement essay each fall. Overseeing the placement of 150-170 second language (L2) students in a few days was overwhelming and daunting at times, but it gave me a better sense of L2 students' challenges in academic writing. The placement essay prompt aimed to gauge students' academic reading and writing skills by asking them to make an argument based on a reading excerpt. Incoming freshmen were asked to summarize, respond to an excerpt and support their argument using their own experience, content from the passage or their general knowledge. It was not easy for native-English speaking students to respond to the essay prompt, but L2 students in particular struggled at various stages of the writing process. While some had trouble understanding the text, others had difficulty writing a coherent and well-organized essay. Many students engaged the text to some extent and incorporated interesting ideas into their essays, but most relied heavily on personal experiences and failed to produce well-developed arguments supported by effective evidence.

Overseeing the placement process prompted me to evaluate what prior knowledge and skills L2 students bring to my writing class and what aspects challenge them. As an instructor, I had scaffolded for argumentation by explaining the concept, giving students examples, and

having them write a number of argumentative essays. The placement essays and student

comments made me realized, however, that not all the assignments and tasks helped students

learn what it means to join the conversation and make an argument. For example, a number of

L2 students told me that questioning or disagreeing with an author made them uncomfortable;

they were used to accepting concepts from the book. As a result, I wanted to create an

argumentative assignment that used a genre that L2 students are familiar with and on a topic with

which they feel comfortable. I also wanted students to realize that an academic argument can

build on their own opinions and ideas and that they are making arguments daily. When my

colleague, Mary Assad (first author of this roundtable), shared her idea of having students make

a comic book, I was intrigued and decided to incorporate it into my teaching. Using the comic

book to teach academic writing may seem odd at first, but it is a genre that most students are

familiar with regardless of their first language and culture. Because many students grew up with

graphic novels and comics, using comics in an academic writing class can excite, engage, and

ultimately empower students by connecting their previous literacy experience with academic

writing. In my class, the comic book assignment was used to teach multimodal argument and

develop critical thinking skills. Multimodality refers to communication practices that combines

more than one mode of communication; it often includes linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and

gestural resources. Examples of multimodal texts are a graphic novel, comics, a webpage which

has music, oral and written language, and images. By sharing my teaching experience in this

article, I argue that a comic book project, in which students create their own comic book, is an

effective tool for teaching multimodal argument and fostering critical thinking skills in a

university L2 writing class. I begin by explaining the teaching context of the project and then detail how the complex task of constructing a comic book can be broken down into manageable classroom activities and assignments. Finally, I share my reflections on the assignment, including its possibilities and limitations.

The class I taught was a theme-based freshman writing class offered at a private university in the Midwestern U.S., which was designed for students whose first language was not English. Each section had approximately 12 students, many of whom came to the university directly from their home country. In addition to helping students in second-language acquisition, the main goals of the course included strengthening students' written and oral communication skills and enhancing their capacity to critically read and write. As students in my class engaged with the class theme—"language, diversity, and multilingualism"—they examined language use from social, cultural, and historical perspectives in a diverse range of communities. As one of the first classes students took at the university, they were required to write in a variety of different academic genres, including an argumentative paper on a topic related to language and society.

I based this assignment on Mary's teaching materials and adapted the prompt to incorporate my course's emphasis on language, diversity, and multilingualism (See Appendix A). For this project, students were asked to persuade incoming or current international students that adopting a specific mindset or behavioral practice would create a rich and rewarding experience in U.S. universities. For example, they could argue that other international students ought to build intercultural friendships or adopt different ways of communicating. The following suggestions provided some ideas for students, but they were not limited to the topics below:

Educational aspect

- Managing time and setting priorities as an international student

- Tackling language barriers in learning

- Becoming an independent learner and using resources

Social aspect

- Developing and maintaining social relationships

- Navigating issues such as homesickness and culture shock

Cultural aspect

- Adjusting to U.S. classroom culture

- Communicating in different ways

Because the students had firsthand experience with these issues, most found it easy to develop an idea for their comic book project.

In order to teach multimodal argument through the comic book project, I first introduced students to rhetorical appeals (pathos, logos, and ethos) and showed them arguments in a variety of genres which drew on these appeals. My goal was to show students how an argument is constructed using one or more persuasive strategies, which depend on the audience and situation. After learning the three elements of rhetorical appeals, students analyzed two advertisements (in picture and video form), a short academic paper and two comics, which were created by students from another class (See Appendix B). Students answered three questions while engaging with these texts: "(1) What rhetorical appeals are used in this text? (2) Who is the audience of this text? (3) What reaction does it elicit from you? Is it effective or not? Why?" Through this in-

class activity, students examined how the writer or creator of the visual is making an argument. They closely analyzed the language and images of a video/text to understand how these elements are used to construct an argument. Rhetorical analysis of the texts pushed students to read critically and helped them understand different strategies of persuasion. By comparing and contrasting modes of persuasion and their effectiveness, students also realized that ethos and logos are given more respect than pathos in academic writing.

A TV commercial for Nationwide Mutual Insurance promoting child's safety sparked a particularly productive student discussion. It features a young boy who laments that he will never do things like ride a bike or get married because he died in an accident. The caption in the ad reads, "The number one cause of childhood deaths is preventable accidents" (USA Today Sports, Nationwide's "Boy" Commercial). While some students argued that the emotional appeal in this ad powerfully and effectively alerts its audience to get life insurance, others argued that using dead children to sell insurance is exploitative and "horrible." Students also examined the ad's striking visuals, including a bathtub that had overflowed and a television that had fallen over, and shared their analysis with each other verbally. Students realized that visuals are important meaning signifiers and started to pay more attention to details, such as fonts, size of letters, color, and use of space, in course texts. Students also recognized that images are a powerful way to communicate ideas and persuade people. When there was a disagreement among students about the text's rhetorical effectiveness, it led to further class discussions on the idea of audience or rhetorical appeals. Students asked questions to each other, explained their rationales, and critically evaluated their peers' argument.

Once students became familiar with rhetorical strategies, they were asked to prepare a "pitch" for their comic book, which helped them to develop their claim, identify the audience and articulate the stakes of their argument. They came to class with the following sentence completed: "I am going to persuade [target audience] to believe [?????] in 8 pages because [why you care]." As a part of crafting their pitch, students learned that a claim should be debatable, rather than generally agreed upon or accepted as fact. This task also required students to identify the audience that they wanted to persuade and articulate their reasons for making their argument. Students targeted slightly different audiences, such as current/prospective international students and matriculated Chinese international students at the university. When a student shared a pitch in, classmates answered the following question: "Is the scope of the claim manageable for an 8-page comic book?" Because some of the students' claims were either too narrow or broad, I used this activity to teach students how to develop and refine their arguments. Students helped each other to adjust the scope of their arguments and practiced making a claim in class. This activity was also an opportunity to teach the "stakes" of a claim. Students were required to articulate why their audience should care about the argument, and they also learned to situate their argument within a larger context. After students crafted and revised their claims, I took them to the university media center workshop. The center's media expert instructed students on how to use Comic Life, an app for creating comics with user's own images, and how to cite pictures online; he then led them in a collaborative storytelling exercise. The session prepared students to use the Comic Life and helped them to see how a story is delivered using texts and visuals.

In the next portion of the assignment, students were asked to consider elements of their comic book by building a story world. By making these decisions, students explored the most productive means of persuading their audience through text and visuals. On a handout, students were asked to answer the following questions: "Who are the characters? Who will tell the story– the first person or third person? What is the time frame? How will you get your images?" As they considered these questions, students were asked to keep in mind, "What is the best way to persuade your audience? For example, if you chose a storyteller to be the first person, why do you think it's a more effective way to tell a story?" Through examining and explaining their stories, students learned how each visual and textual element comes together to deliver a message or idea. Students came up with a plan for plot, characters and other details and brought their plans to receive peer feedback. During the peer feedback session, L2 students demonstrated their critical thinking skills by reconsidering choices that they and their peers made related to building storylines. For example, one student's original idea was to bring two cute chipmunks to lead the story, but he changed his protagonist to himself because he thought that first-person narrative and real experience examples would make his story more powerful. He was inspired to make this change because his peers asked him "Why did you choose chipmunks instead of using humans? In what ways are they special?" Another plot featured a struggling student because the student wanted her intended audience to feel empathy for the protagonist. Students were actively engaged in the feedback process and critically questioned the choices made using visuals and texts. Although students had the option of using existing images from the Internet, most of them took pictures with their friends because it was easier to create images of what they intended to

show. In building their own story world collaboratively, students both examined the best way to put texts and visuals together to make an effective argument and created a safe, productive classroom.

Overall, students were excited and enthusiastic about making a comic book with their stories; they engaged with interesting topics and made compelling arguments by reflecting on their experiences as international students in the U.S. Some students chose topics related to study strategies, while others focused on social and cultural aspects of their experience. One student from Vietnam pointed out that international students are not aware of LGBT issues and used the comic book to inform readers and encourage them to embrace gender diversity on campus. To explain gender-neutral pronouns (cf. they/them, ze/hir), the student drew a picture that brilliantly illustrated gender identity as a spectrum. She also included a picture of the LGBT center on campus and rainbow wristbands to facilitate readers' understanding of the topic. To demonstrate LGBT issues are relevant to students' campus life, the images and texts together invited international students to learn more about LGBT issues. Another student's comic book portrayed how she had distanced herself from other Chinese students and only spent time with her American friends. Her images depict her effort to "fit in" to mainstream American culture. In the first panel, three friends are sitting on the university lawn, and two of them talk about their fun prom experiences. Sitting next to them, the leading character says "Umm… we don't have a prom in my high school." Above, a thought bubble reads "It seems like I don't belong to them at all…" The protagonist's sense of isolation is reinforced by a picture of an empty black and white lecture hall on the next panel. The images and texts together create a sense of isolation and

connect with readers who also struggle with negotiating multiple cultures. The student used pathos and logos to effectively to make an argument that distancing oneself from their own ethnic culture can make oneself feel lost and lonely. The student goes further and maintains that international students do not have to choose one culture; balancing two cultures will help them become mature individuals and ultimately enable them to gain the most meaningful experience. Many students became more confident as they articulated their choices of visuals and texts in a peer review session. They critically scrutinized why they chose certain colors, space, letters, and fonts, as well as their decisions to write more or include more visuals. This reinforced the pedagogical value of comics in an academic writing class as students developed attention to detail and learned to consider their own rhetorical decisions through peer review.

Scholars argue that writing instructors should provide a place for students to produce multimodal texts and help them become competent in both critical analysis and design of multimodal texts (NCTE; Takayoshi and Selfe 8). Creating a comic book in an L2 writing class provides students with this opportunity and makes them move beyond passive consumers of multimodal texts. As a whole, the comic book project was an effective tool for teaching students how to make a multimodal argument and foster critical thinking skills. As students constructed their own comics, they exercised a meaning-making process through multimodal texts, which is one of the most common communication forms in contemporary literacy practices. In addition, the comic book assignment developed students' critical thinking skills as they explain their textual choices and present an argument for their interpretation. This allowed students to be more aware of the textual and visual choices that they make as writers. Because the comic book is a

genre that most students are already familiar with regardless of their native language, the comic

book assignment encouraged them to leverage their previous knowledge and makes learning to

create multimodal argument more accessible. Making an argument in an academic paper differs

significantly from making an argument in a comic book, but students learned the basic

components of an argument, such as rhetorical strategies and the scope of an argument and

stakes, through this project. Finally, taking pictures for their comic book helped students to

interact and engage with people outside the classroom. For example, the student who wrote about

LGBT issues visited the LGBT center on campus, made connections with the office and learned

more about diversity. The student who wrote about developing friendships with American

students invited these friends to be in his comic book, thus using the assignment to strengthen his

existing relationships. To make a multimodal argument, students took pictures that represent

their ideas and messages; in doing so, they developed connections with the Case Western

community. Although the comic book assignment is not the only assignment that can promote

interaction of L2 students in an academic community, it provided them with a unique

opportunity to interact with other members of the academic community.

In this article, I have discussed how I scaffolded a comic book project in a university L2

writing class and argued for its pedagogical value in teaching multimodal argument and fostering

critical thinking skills. Although this project was assigned in a specific university L2 writing

class, it can be adapted to other types of writing courses and as a different type of assignment.

For example, the length of the comic book can be shortened to 1-2 pages, and its purpose can be

modified to fit other learning goals, such as summarizing a traditional text or explaining a

concept to a specific audience. Comic book assignment can be used to scaffold for another assignment or develop students' genre awareness. For example, after writing an academic paper, students can present the content of the paper in the form of comics. By comparing and contrasting an academic paper with comics, students can be better prepared to write in a wide variety of contexts. Through creating a storyline and constructing a message through visuals and texts, a comic book assignment can foster students' understanding of how design and rhetorical conventions contribute to an argument's meaning and persuasiveness. It can also further reinforce students' critical thinking skills as they examine the effectiveness of their choices. The comic book has much to offer to an L2 writing classroom, but it can be challenging in a number of ways. The comic book project needs careful scaffolding, and it can be more time-consuming for instructors when compared to traditional writing assignments. If a student is not familiar with the comic book genre, he or she may struggle to learn the conventions quickly. Despite the challenges, incorporating a comic book assignment into a university L2 writing course offers exciting opportunities for teaching multimodality and critical thinking. I believe that the benefits of the comic book are not limited to developing multimodal literacies and critical thinking; in my class, the comic book assignment allowed students to reflect their experiences, engage with a topic of their interest and developed a sense of ownership. I hope that more L2 writing teachers will explore comics and what they have offer to their classroom.

Appendix A

<div align="center">

Comic Book Project

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Instructions

The goal of this assignment is for you to create an 8-page comic book for international students who come to study in the United States. You will convince (current and/or prospective) international students to do X in and outside of the classroom to be successful in U.S. universities. For example, you can persuade other international students to build intercultural friendships or adapt different ways of communicating (c.f. To be successful and have rich and rewarding experience in U.S. universities, you should do X). The following topics provide some ideas for you, but your argument does not need be limited to these topics:

Educational aspect
- Managing time and setting priorities as an international student
- Tackling language barriers in learning
- Becoming an independent learner and using resources

Social aspect
- Developing and maintaining social relationships
- Navigating issues such as homesickness and culture shock

Cultural aspect
- Adjusting to U.S. classroom culture
- Communicating in different ways

Remember that you have to go beyond simply telling your audience to do or not to do something. You need to try to change their beliefs about the topic first, and that's the goal of this comic book. Your job is to use the visual narrative format to tell a story that will entertain, educate, and hopefully change the beliefs of your audience so that they ultimately may change their behaviors as well. Have fun and be creative!

Targeted Outcomes
- The work adopts a distinct stance vis-à-vis a well-defined audience, and various aspects of the work (mode of inquiry, content, structure, appeals, tone, sentences, and word choice) are strategically pitched to that audience.
- Making a complex and effective argument using texts and images.
- Reflect critically and constructively on your own ideas and those of others.

Format
- Comic Book: 8 pages, images and words AND
- Rationale: 1-2 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman size 12 font

Evaluation Criteria

- Persuasive storytelling (25pts)
- Use of text & images (25pts)
- Engagement (25pts)
- Rationale (25pts)

Appendix B

<p align="center">Analysis of an Argument</p>

We have learned in class that there are three types of rhetorical appeals used in arguments to support claims: pathos, logos, and ethos. As a group, you will examine *how* the writer and creator of the visual is presenting the argument by analyzing the use of rhetorical strategies. The goal of this activity is to analyze the language and images of a video/text to understand how these elements are used to construct an argument.

For each video and text, answer the three questions:

> (1) What rhetorical appeals are used in this text?
> (2) Who is the audience of this text?
> (3) What reaction does it elicit from you? Is it effective or not? Why?"

1. TV Commercial
   Nationwide's "Boy" Commercial (Video)
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F77RBUBlZ80

2. Magazine Advertisement
   Milk for Real Men

3. Academic Paper.
   Claude, G., & Kirstin, W. (2015). Bilingual education: Reviving the American Tradition. *American Educator, 39*(3), 28-32.

   → Revisit the article that we already read in class.

4. Two comics written by Case Western students (Distributed in class)

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