Dr Peter Venkman: 'Scuse me Egon? You said crossing the streams was bad!...'

Dr Ray Stanz: 'Cross the streams...'

Comics, manga, graphic novels and the challenge and excitement of cross-curricular work (with apologies to *Ghostbusters* [1984])

by Mel Gibson

Sequential art of all kinds lends itself to cross-curricular work within schools, colleges and beyond. Most typically, this draws in art and literature in a number of different ways, depending on the chosen emphasis and who the lead department or member of staff is. I have come across a range of approaches to using the medium and will flag up a few examples from around Britain in this article, but will concentrate in the latter part of the article on a very intensive 'Theme Day' that took place at Driffield School, East Yorkshire (**www.driffieldschool.net**).

In terms of approaching organizing cross-curricular work with comics, the first stages should be locating expertise and enthusiasm amongst the staff and students and locating appropriate primary texts to stimulate the work developed. Students may already be engaged with creating their own comics on a range of themes, so there may be skills and interests that staff can draw on there. I would also always suggest working with the school librarian, or schools library service, as this will resource curriculum work will as well as offering scope for developing leisure reading collections.

As one very small example of ways of working with and thinking about comics, a nine-year-old boy I met in a bookshop last weekend, pulled the adults with him over to a stand, so that he could show them Bryan Talbot's (2007) *Alice in*

'…pupils were not daunted, but excited, and inspired…'

Sunderland: An Entertainment. He announced that they had the book in the library at school and he had read it (this is a very challenging text aimed largely at an older audience). He explained that it was all about history and Sunderland and then outlined to the initially slightly bemused adults how the first few pages worked, doing a rather good job of it. When asked, he added that his class was, 'doing a comic about the history of our village', so pulling together library and classroom, reading, visual literacy, historical research, and art in one fell swoop. In offering Talbot's text as an example of what could be done, the pupils were not daunted, but excited, and inspired to try and make their own vision of their home.

Such an approach is entirely possible with older students. My first experience of this was in working with a school during a themed week centered on Japan some years ago. This involved taking the entire school off curriculum. With Japanese culture and history as the overarching theme, the librarian had developed a good collection of manga and anime, in the latter case, particularly of Studio Ghibli classics. These were used predominantly in media classes, exploring cultural difference in animation (with the approach being close textual analysis of scenes from the films, comparing them to Disney and other key examples). However, there were also library screenings, with permission, and the creation of still artwork inspired by the films, so working across art and media both formally and informally. In addition, students taking 'A' level Japanese gave taster sessions to younger pupils and all of the history classes focused on Japan, as did geography. There were also sessions in the library focusing on manga, via school reading groups. In some senses this was multi-disciplinary rather than inter-disciplinary work, but the collaboration on creating a manga about the week, outlining key elements of what students had learnt, drew all of the strands together. The latter was begun during the week, with students acting as both reporters and note-takers, but finished afterwards, with some working on text, others on illustration and production.

Another, smaller scale activity drawing together art, media, ICT and, as primary material, drama, involved the use of mobile technologies, Comic Life software (from **http://plasq.com/**) and attendance at a theatrical performance. The students used mobiles or cameras during the performance to gather the material that would be incorporated into their photo-stories, selecting and editing the material to give their version of the narrative and adding speech balloons that drew on their understanding of the dialogue. The software enabled them to print out and distribute their own versions, some of which went back to the theatre company.

A final short example, which again draws in yet another subject area, science, can be found in a project initiated by the Mixed Reality Laboratory at the University of Nottingham, who were investigating the ways in which sequential art could be used within the scientific method to communicate ideas and information between practitioners and with a wider audience. This involved a number of strands, including working with schools to enable them to record their own experiments by creating comics, again using Comic Life software, circulate them to other schools and get feedback on what they had done, along with developing self-assessment skills. This necessitated working across media, ICT and art, as well as science, and drew on the existence of lists like the following, which offers a short bibliography of science comics **http://cindispace.utdallas.edu/education/science_comics.html**
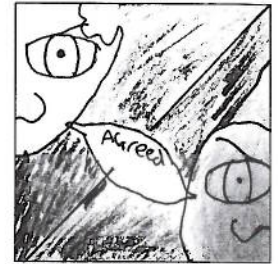
'Students …were given a passport to which they added stickers after their participation in each activity.'

To return to the Driffield School Theme Day, I was an invited speaker, so saw how the day worked at first hand, but my participation was only one element of a range of activities that involved the entirety of Year 7, a total of 297 students. I had indirectly provided some support for the development of the day through two websites, both of which had provided contacts, information and suggestions on working with and promoting comics. The first was created through my National Teaching Fellowship, Dr Mel Comics **http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/** and the second was commissioned by Learning and Teaching Scotland as an extension of the literacy element of their website **http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/intro.asp**

' … involved the entirety of Year 7…'

'Dennis the Menace could be both a hero and a villain.'

The graphic novels and comics day was developed by a small team comprising staff from both Art and English, but came to involve a much wider group. Kit Hamilton, art teacher, was my main contact. In outlining the day to me he explained that the overarching theme was Personal Learning and Thinking Skills with a focus on the Effective Participators strand. The students worked with teachers all day in 11 groups of around 28 students, based around the students' mixed ability English groups, which were, in turn, split into smaller working teams of about four. Students moved from one activity to another over the course of the day, and were given a passport to which they added stickers after their participation in each activity.

The day began with two presentations by guest speakers, Paul Gravett **http://www.paulgravett. com/** and myself. We were both asked to share our knowledge and enthusiasm for the medium. Paul focused tightly on the history of Heroes and Villains in comics (this being a key aspect of the day) and I developed the idea that this could be quite complicated in that a figure like Dennis the Menace could be both a hero and a villain, as well as encouraging students to share their knowledge about comic characters.

Whilst the day offered some serious topics for discussion, some of the students, for instance, analyzing the differences between the versions of the Joker that they were aware of (so drawing in notions of wider media and textual analysis), and a great deal of discussion about Heath Ledger's performance and what it meant, there were also playful aspects to the event, and a healthy insistence on involving as many other students and staff as possible. This included some of the teachers wearing costume, the distribution of free comics by older students (sponsored by Traveling Man, a small but lovely comic shop chain) and a bookshop in the school foyer (again provided by Traveling Man).

From the first talks (in effect a year assembly) everyone moved into a series of events, including three one-hour-long workshop sessions, one on designing a superhero, another on designing a villain and a third on plot and storyline.

Students created model 'dens' for their villain and painted a larger than life cardboard cutout image of the superhero they were designing, one of the art elements of the day, and negotiated a set of physical challenges and problem solving exercises with it.

There were also contextual workshops with both myself and Paul, the latter using websites that focused on the superhero in support of the design work, the former offering a collection of books and enabling a grasp of the infinite range of potential narratives that can be developed when making comics. Both allowed students to explore and develop ideas relating to the workshop themes.

The day ended with all of the groups working on a storyboarding exercise to bring their ideas together, based around the theme of a disaster in Driffield, caused by the villain, which had to be solved using the problem solving and communication skills (as well as the superpowers) of the hero. The intention was to follow this work up after the day in art lessons, enabling the creative work begun during the day to be extended.

This proved to be a very intensive day. It indicates, as do the other examples, the possibilities of cross-curricular work focused on comics, which can be wide-ranging and make unexpected links. The key is the initial research, an exploration of what work you can use as inspiration, and drawing your resources together, both of texts and individuals, at an early stage. This also offers the possibility of partnership working, whether with outside organizations such as publishers, creators and shops, or with students, drawing on their knowledge and enthusiasm for the medium. These events can be both small and large scale, from small scale work turning poems into short strips, to the larger ones outlined above. Whilst theme days offer significant challenges, and you may feel, like the Ghostbusters, that they may appear to be on a larger scale than you can cope with, take heart, as they also offer tremendous rewards, especially in the excitement and engagement such events can engender in both staff and students. ∎

Mel Gibson
See also Mel Gibson's article on classics and comics, in *Classroom* no. 9, and reference **http://www.dr-mel-comics.co.uk/** for further resources.