Reading and Creating Comics

Course proposed by Amy Letter for Spring 2015

“Comics”: Scott McCloud’s influential *Understanding Comics* brought this word in from the funny pages and gave it the respect it deserves. It’s the best word to describe a kind of visual storytelling that may take place across a few panels, upon a printed page, down a long scrolling webpage, or between the covers of a graphic novel. It is a form of storytelling that speaks along the spectrum of symbolic abstraction from the letters of language to photorealistic imagery and everything in between. There is significant literature, visual art, and design to be found within comics, and I propose a course that allows students to explore that literature, art, and design, and to create new literature, art, and design of their own: in short to read and create comics.

Undergraduates who wish to create comics find little to no structured support at most universities, including Drake. They can learn about storytelling in literature and creative writing classes, they can learn about images in drawing classes and page design in graphic design classes, but it’s rare for any one course to bring these areas together. Nationally, there are very few comics creators or graphic novelists who are professors, so it’s difficult for students to find guidance in this setting from accomplished professionals. Yet there is demand, and it is a demand that I believe we can meet by tearing down the walls between English and Art, between literature/writing and drawing/graphic design.

I propose to develop a course that coordinates our college’s strengths in literary study, creative writing, drawing, and graphic design. The course would need to make use of both the available expertise and the available infrastructure (professors, yes, and also design computers and software, studios suitable for drawing lessons, classrooms for lecture/discussion of literary modes in graphic narrative, etc.). We would ideally want to bring in an accomplished comics creator for a short period (a week or so) to work closely with faculty and students. This guest could guide the professors as well as the students, assisting us as we develop our own comics. This combined experience and expertise will result in a course for students that would give them access to several professors and one professional and the opportunity to tell their own stories, develop their own visual styles, and design their own pages (be they print or web) that lead the eye and communicate through smart design decisions.

Readings might include *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, *Very Casual* by Michael DeForge, *The Terrible & Wonderful Reasons Why I Run Long Distances* (parts 1-6) by The Oatmeal (Matthew Inman), *MAUS* by Art Spiegelman, selections from the oeuvre of Alan Moore (and the panoply of artists with whom he’s worked), *City of Glass: The Graphic
*Novel* by Paul Auster and adapted by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, selections from *xkcd* (eg: “Click and Drag”) by Randall Munroe, selections from the *No Straight Lines* (ed. Justin Hall) anthology of Queer Comics, etc.

I propose that the course be offered in Spring 2015. To achieve this, the course would need to be approved departmentally by October of 2014 and move through the college approval process shortly thereafter. Any guests who will be invited to support this course would need to be contacted and their travel arrangements confirmed at that time, if not sooner. Classroom assignments will require special attention since this course will meet in more than one location. The professors leading the course would need to meet in the weeks preceding the Spring semester to strategize and coordinate their efforts, and to work out the final details of the syllabus. The opening weeks of the semester should allow the students to establish a theoretical framework and begin studying comics readings from the different perspectives of their professors: as literature, as visual art, and as design. Upon the 4th or 5th week of classes, I propose the faculty and students begin work on their creative projects, and that the visiting comics creator come in at the midpoint of the semester, around week 8, to work with professors and students. When the visitor departs, the course should continue with the goal of completing the comics before finals week, and should conclude with a video conference that allows the visitor to see the finished works and offer some final thoughts and critique. I would also consider it very valuable to conclude the semester with a gallery show and talk by students and professors on their work and the intellectual and artistic discoveries that they made in the course of the term.

Ideal visiting writer/artist/designers might include Alison Bechdel (*Dykes to Watch Out For, Fun Home, Are You My Mother?*), or Michael DeForge (*Very Casual*). Matthew Inman (*The Oatmeal*) would make an interesting guest because of his work with web design and his remarkable success with self publishing and promotion. Justin Hall, the editor of *No Straight Lines* would also make a compelling guest, as he is among the rare and few cartoonists who also teach comics at the college level (California College of the Arts, San Francisco). Guest selection dependent in part on schedule and availability.

This course will fit well with the curricular goals of the Department of English: it falls into the model of the department’s “Reading and Writing” series, except that this course includes drawing and designing in addition to writing, and “reading” in the case of this course goes on to include the interpretation of images and the spaces between them, as well as consciousness of page design. This course will also help the English Department expand its track in Film, Drama, and New Media, which is focused on forms of literature that enhance the written word through performance, cinematography, and multimedia. The study of and creation of comics fits neatly with the theory underpinning this new track, and is
an important area for coverage. This course should also serve to satisfy major requirements for Studio Art and Graphic Design majors – part of the planning of the course would be to work with the Art Department and make sure that this is the case.

This would be a productive and potentially quite brilliant cross fertilization of the arts and humanities that may result in some tangible (or at least highly visible and engaging) work. It will require an investment and coordination of time and resources across departments, but will reward these efforts significantly, in a way that will benefit the college, the departments and programs involved, the professors who choose to take part, and most importantly the students who gain from the wonderful educational and artistic experience this course would create.

I hope you will see fit to fund the development of this course.

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