Comics in the Classroom
By James Sturm

Despite the growing critical recognition and commercial success of cartoonists' work and the fervent interest in the medium from young artists, academe does not recognize the medium's legitimacy. Aspiring painters, sculptors, photographers, and writers can go to any number of colleges and universities and get a solid liberal-arts education as well as advanced training in their craft. But if you are an aspiring cartoonist, your pickings are slim.

Only a handful of institutions offer programs or courses in cartooning or comics, and only one -- Savannah College of Art and Design -- has a graduate program. The growth of that college's sequential-art department is evidence of the medium's popularity. The department, which offers a master's degree, enrolls more than 250 students, and includes six faculty members, evolved from one comic-book-illustration course offered in 1990, in the college's illustration department. It was so popular that another faculty member was hired to offer additional sections the following year. In 1992, the college created a major in "sequential art," and the program is still growing. The limited number of programs at colleges and universities reflects the public's perception of comics as primarily prepubescent adventure stories or bland daily comic strips. Movie reviewers often describe splashy action films with little story as having a comic-book plot. But the students enrolling in comics-art classes think of the medium differently: To them, comics are stories with pictures that are not limited by genre or stylistic constraints.

When Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale was first published in 1987, it caught many by surprise. Intertwining the stories of the Holocaust and Spiegelman's relationship with his father, an Auschwitz survivor, the book demonstrated that comics could handle the complexity of subjects like the Holocaust and personal memoir with as much sensitivity and intelligence as film or prose. Maus's critical and commercial success -- a second volume was published in 1992, and both volumes won a Pulitzer Prize that year -- led to scores of articles pronouncing that "comics are not just for kids anymore." The pump was primed for other graphic works to capture the public's imagination. Unfortunately, at that time, Maus had few worthy successors. Its achievement was considered an anomaly. A review in The New Yorker went as far as to state that Maus wasn't really a comic.

But a generation of young cartoonists, having grown up with Maus, has begun to produce stunning work. Graphic novels are now regularly reviewed in The New York Times Book Review. A popular movie, Ghost World (2001), was made from Daniel Clowes's 1997 graphic novel. Museums are acquiring pages of comic art, which also adorn the walls of galleries. Esquire and The New Yorker have run comic stories in their fiction issues. A MacArthur "genius" grant was awarded to the cartoonist Ben Katchor. Chris Ware, the author of the graphic novel Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth, is being compared to James Joyce and is one of the artists in the prestigious Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. (The exhibition runs through May 26.)

Although bookstores still tend to categorize graphic novels as "humor," and chain bookstores

don't order graphic novels from the small presses that publish them, Follett's, which runs many college bookstores, now stocks graphic novels and comics and has identified comics as a "growth area." Publishers are starting their own lines of graphic novels, or entering distribution agreements with small publishers like Fantagraphics Books (whose authors include R. Crumb, Dan Clowes, and Chris Ware).

There is even a definitive textbook. In the early 1990s, the cartoonist Scott McCloud produced Understanding Comics. This Marshall McLuhanesque dissertation uses the medium itself to explore the myriad ways that comics combine the intimacy of the written word with the visceral impact of drawing and design. It has become the de facto textbook for young cartoonists and has sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

Whether one considers comics as art or as literature, it is apparent that the medium, after a prolonged adolescence, is coming of age.

But despite the growing critical recognition and commercial success of cartoonists' work, academe does not recognize the medium's legitimacy. Most art colleges narrowly consider comics a commercial illustration style. A single class may be offered as an illustration elective emphasizing its humorous conventions. Universities and liberal-arts colleges, which are a student's best bet for a well-rounded education, offer programs in film, video, and poetry, but not in comics. Comics appear to be in the same category as graffiti: They might be talked about in a cultural-studies or sociology class, or in an art-survey class, but that's about it. The Savannah College of Art and Design can't even manage to say the word "comics": The major's name itself -- "sequential art" -- seems like a bid for legitimacy.

It is obvious to me that comics are a legitimate art form. During my four years of teaching in Savannah College's sequential-art department, my students produced heartbreaking autobiographical stories, dreamlike myths using found text and appropriated images, and philosophical musings drawn in the style of the great 1920s cartoonist Cliff Sterrett. Students felt tremendous excitement and relief at having found a place where they could follow their muse, even if she was moving through panels. Many had transferred from other art programs, because there was no one there to engage in a critical dialogue about their work, or more frequently, because their efforts were met with disdain.

That feeling of not being taken seriously in school is common among my cartooning peers as well. I remember being told in college that comics could influence my work but not be my work. Seventeen years later, little has changed.

Without any models on which to build, creating a curriculum was a continuing challenge. Enthusiastic students who seemed grateful to be taken seriously made the task easier. In the classroom, it often felt like we were discovering a new language. What happens when we thicken this panel's border or eliminate it altogether? Does it slow tempo or increase it? Does rendering characters more simplistically strengthen or diminish their ability to project emotion? When is too much detail distracting? What information can be conveyed using only pictures? How does text function as a visual element itself? Form and content are so tightly woven that in any given

class we found ourselves talking about the structure of coming-of-age novels one moment and, in the next, how the placement of black ink leads the eye across a page.

A comics-art curriculum is interdisciplinary. As comics-art students learn to become literate and visually literate, they need to develop a vast array of skills. They need classes in drawing, writing, computer art, literature, storyboard, and character design. They need research skills, so they can make their stories convincing and make their characters behave and look real enough to come alive on the page or screen.

The question I was asked most by parents of prospective students was, "How is my child going to earn a living drawing comics?" My answer was simple: They may not. But the diverse career paths available to comics-art graduates allay parents' fears. Graduates of the Savannah College of Art and Design leave the program in good shape to succeed in today's marketplace. (The undergraduate program is four years, the graduate two.)

Recently I received e-mail messages from a former student, who was keeping me up to date with his work. He had placed several of his graphic stories in small-press anthologies and has been receiving favorable reviews. He was looking forward to someday collecting his stories, finding a publisher, and putting out a book. By day, he designs video games. Sequential-art graduates ply their skills by doing animation, illustration, storyboards (for advertising agencies and animation and gaming studios), journalism, and, of course, drawing and writing for the large comics-publishing houses. Students from many majors benefit from comics-art courses. Film and video students learn how to create storyboards and visually consider their assignments before the cameras roll. Creative-writing and illustration students learn to approach their work from new perspectives. Graphic designers gain by studying the work of comics artists like Alex Toth, George Herriman, and Los Bros Hernandez, and painters have a long history of being influenced by comics. Philip Guston, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Joan Mir? are examples of artists who have incorporated formal elements from comics onto their canvases.

Computer-art students always account for a large percentage of my students. Web browsers are like illuminated manuscripts, exploring the Internet through bursts of words and pictures. The tools that today's computer artists have at their fingertips are miraculous and overwhelming -- countless images can be conjured with a few clicks of a mouse. It is the organization of images that shapes meaning, and that is what comics teach. If academe begins to recognize and encourage the talented students who have chosen this medium, institutions can not only duplicate the growth of the sequential-art department at the Savannah College of Art and Design, but also play a crucial role in advancing an important new art form. In "high arts" like painting, sculpture, theater, dance, and poetry, colleges and universities nurture young artists and keep the art form's history alive for the next generation of practitioners to discover. Academe could and should play that vital role for the medium of comics as well.

"Readers in the 21st century need to be able to analyze what they read and understand the motive of the author and the accuracy of the reading. They need to see themselves as active users, not merely vessels to be filled. Graphic novels offer a forum for these essential discussions." - - Nancy Frey, Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School. Included: Resources for finding and teaching classroom-appropriate comics and graphic novels. Are you looking for a way to motivate reluctant readers, engage urban youth, develop the comprehension skills of second-lang In traditional education, only the class toppers are recognized and encouraged to do better. Details. Stacey Lee. Dec 10 2019. Cool Tech Tools To Learn Languages. The following are the tools that are being used worldwide to impart practise in speaking, reading, listening and writing with different languages: Google Tool Creator. Authors of â€œProject-based learning in the Math Classroom: Grades 6-10â€, Norfar and Chris Fancher have come up with five classroom-tested strategies that could facilitate PBL in math classes. Clearing the math myth. While many educators worry about the enormous time taken away by the PBL, Fancher and Norfar insist on making the students explain how they solved the problems.