

StarTribune | lifestyle

News Local Sports Business Politics Opinion **Lifestyle** Entertainment Obituaries Classifieds Autos Housing Jobs **Weekly Ad**

Weekly ads | Taste | Home + Garden | Travel | Health | Style | Relationships | Steals | Blogs + Columns

Like 5.9k

Home > Lifestyle

Comic books have become legitimate teaching tools

Article by: AIMEE BLANCHETTE, Star Tribune | Updated: March 12, 2013 - 4:51 PM

Graphic novels, which combine text and images, are gaining acceptance as effective teaching tools in the digital age.



hide

Wayzata High School teacher Mark Ferry's class recently read a graphic novel and worked on drawing one of their own. "Kids love to read these books," said Ferry. "They're always asking when they're going to get new ones."

Photo: Jim Gehrz, Star Tribune
Star Tribune photo galleries
view larger

2 comments | resize text | print | buy reprints

Recommend 169 Tweet share +

from the homepage

Police, dive team find nothing so far in search for Trevino's body

Mille Lacs walleye limit cut in half; size rules updated

Study: Therapy as good as surgery for knee repair

150 Credits

Earn the additional required credits toward CPA licensure while establishing a professional network at Minnesota's *only* private business school accredited by the AACSB.

The Master of Science Degree in Accountancy

[Start now »](#)

UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS MINNESOTA
Opus College of Business

UST MS ACCOUNTANCY

ADVERTISEMENT

question of the day

POLL: What is your favorite new foodie destination?

- Smack Shack
- Borough
- Burch
- Union
- I don't like any of these places.

vote

View results

related content

The students in a New Literature class at Wayzata High School have been chided for a surprising reason: Not putting their books down.

"I'm telling them not to read ahead," said teacher Meaghan Decker. "They're having the hardest time with it because they love these books so much."

What they're reading is just as surprising: "The Death of Superman," "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns" and "Watchmen."

Long thought of as easy reads with little substance, comic books have entered the public school lexicon. Originally used to help struggling readers and English-language learners, the books are now used in elementary classrooms and college lecture halls.

The recently implemented Minnesota Academic Standards called for the use of new forms of media — including graphic novels — in the curriculum. And educators nationwide are embracing them as an essential genre in a media-dominated society.

"The graphic novel can no longer be ignored as a passing fad," said Heidi Hammond, a professor at St. Catherine University who studies the graphic novel. "It is here to stay."

There's research to bolster that claim. A study by the University of Oklahoma found that graphic novels engage students, encourage reading and increase complex thinking skills. The study, which measured how students retain information, found that students who read material in a comics format, as opposed to text-only, retained more information verbatim. A full 80 percent of the students in the study also said they preferred the comics.

The great equalizer

Students aren't the only ones who like graphic novels. Some of the educators who have used them say the medium is perfect for snaring the attention of young learners who have grown accustomed to the vivid imagery on TV, film, magazines and websites.

Teachers like Jill Chang believe the books develop confidence in students, which helps to build interest in reading at an early age.

Chang helped develop a graphic novel unit for third- and fourth-graders at St. Paul Academy that includes the "Ellie McDoodle" series and "The Tale of Despereaux."

"The excitement and motivation I see in my students is proof these books are working," Chang said. "They're making them better readers and writers."

Other teachers are finding that the text-and-picture format appeals to students with a wide range of abilities and learning styles.

"You can have the AP students in class with the non-AP students," said Mark Ferry, teacher of the Wayzata High graphic novel class. "It's really like the great equalizer in education,"

Senior Aaron Olson originally took Ferry's class thinking it would be a fun diversion from his advanced courses, but quickly learned that psychoanalyzing superheros and plots, and having to read both the pictures and the text was just as challenging.

"It's like reading and watching a movie at the same time," he said.

That's why Ferry has come to believe that that graphic novels require more complex thinking skills than traditional literature.

The graphic novels being used in schools today typically offer a heftier reading experience than the traditional paper comics that sold for pennies decades ago. Graphic novels contain more pages and are bound like books instead of magazines.



High school students enjoy titles like "Maus" and "Watchmen" while younger students get the more age-appropriate "Ellie McDoodle" series.



Popular graphic novels for students

Tuesday March 12, 2013

Elementary "Owly" series, by Andy Runton "TOON" comics treasury, conceived by Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman "Babymouse" series, by Jennifer L. Holm and...

more from lifestyle

For first time in years, Mexico may not be a top-10 travel destination

Robocalls that cannot be stopped

New life for old stuff

most read most emailed most watched

Study: Therapy as good as surgery for knee repair

Want to make your brain smarter? Then slow down

Coupon craze is fading

New life for old stuff

Patient sues Twin Cities clinic for role in meningitis outbreak

Ask Amy: Drunk friend insists she's OK to drive

Millennials are becoming the foodie generation

Plenty of ways to turn your trash into cash

connect



calendar of events

Advanced Search

Tue 19	Linda's Cellar
Wed 20	How Quaint
Thu 21	Majestic Oaks Boutique
Fri 22	Dog Obedience
Sat 23	Pet Loss Support Group
Sun 24	Introduction to Pet Dog...
Mon 25	Minnesota Humane Society
	Introduction to Pet Dog...
	Sap to Syrup

Search by category Choose

Tell us about an event | Tell us about a venue

ADVERTISEMENT

They aren't all about superheroes, either. They can address serious issues such as immigration, identity, racial stereotyping and discrimination. For example, the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Maus" is a graphic novel about the Holocaust. There also are graphic forms of history, physics, even math books.

While it's difficult to say how many schools use graphic novels, the number of the comic-style books being published for young adults and adapted to school subjects is on the rise.

At Big Time Attic studios in northeast Minneapolis, cartoonists Kevin Cannon and Xander Cannon (no relation) have been writing and illustrating educational nonfiction comic books for nearly a decade. They've written books on genetics, the Soviet space race and paleontology, and recently just completed their first graphic novel textbook for college publishing giant Bedford St. Martin's.

"It totally blows my mind," Kevin Cannon said of comics' growing popularity in education. "I'm just regretful they didn't exist when I was in high school."

Stigma still exists

Librarian Tori Jensen is happy to see credit given where she believes credit is long overdue, especially since comics launched her interest in books.

"My dad would buy me comics from the drugstore and that's how I learned to read," said Jensen, the media specialist at LEAP High School in St. Paul, where graphic novels are as popular as such other well-read books as the "Twilight" series.

"When I became interested in being a librarian, I believed comic books should be a big part of the collection," she said. "I just think they're the best things since sliced bread."

Still, it has taken a long time for them to be taken seriously. Schools in the Twin Cities didn't consider them a legitimate form of literature until a few years ago.

Ferry and Decker spent a year researching the educational benefits of graphic novels before introducing the class in Wayzata. They quickly gained support from administration, fellow teachers and the majority of parents, but, Decker said, they still have to convince skeptics.

"Anyone who comes in and watches what we're doing will quickly realize this is a real class with real books," she said.

"There may still be a stigma attached to the comics format of graphic novels that causes people to regard them as subpar literature — the reading equivalent of junk food," said Hammond at St. Kate's.

Like any new genre, full acceptance of the graphic novel as a literary medium will take some time, said Diana Green, a professor at Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

"Sure, the superhero and kids' stuff is fun," Green said. "But you can tell a really sophisticated story with people who are pelting each other with planets."

Aimee Blanchette • 612-673-1715

2 comments | resize text print | buy reprints

Recommend 169

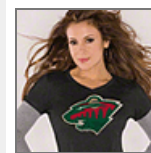
Tweet share +

from around the web sponsored links

more from star tribune

[?]

fan gear »



Hockey is back! Get your MN Wild gear.

my job rocks »



Nominate your company now »

steals »



Save 50% off or more! »

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

Offers & Events



Free Massage at Healthsource!
Fix your pain now; free massage and consultation at a Healthsource near you
Schedule appointment now!

ADVERTISEMENT

\$5 for 8 weeks
Unlimited Digital Access

StarTribune »

ADVERTISEMENT

[How Long Does LASIK Last? \(LasikPlus\)](#)

[13 Things Your Pizza Guy Won't Tell You \(Reader's Digest\)](#)

[Raiders release trio of players, including two former first-round picks \(Sports Illustrated\)](#)

[The \\$1400 Encyclopedia Britannica: By the Numbers \(The Fiscal Times\)](#)

[A Couple at Sea: A. L. Kennedy Talks About 'The Blue Book' \(The New York Times\)](#)

[Harry Potter Quiz: Which Character Are You? \(Beliefnet.com\)](#)

[Bullying: Kids haven't changed; we have](#)

[Coupon craze is fading](#)

[Sarah Palin's next cause: Christmas](#)

[Amelia Rayno's NCAA picks](#)

[Cops: Probe to show how NY man cut ankle monitor before killing mom, raping girl in carjacking](#)

[Fort Snelling buildings to house homeless vets](#)



2010 VW Tiguan
\$16,795
www.westsidevw.com



2009 Ford Escape Hybrid
\$17,999
www.metropolitanford.com



2006 Hummer H2 SUT
\$29,998
www.metropolitanford.com



2004 Ford Mustang GT Convert
\$13,998
www.metropolitanford.com

find a used car

(ex. Acura in White Bear Lake)

inside the StarTribune

[lifestyle »](#)



2013 Minnesota Summer Camp Guide

[opinion »](#)



The Dayton budget proposal

[local »](#)



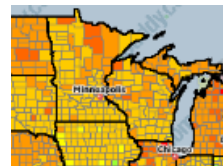
The Star Tribune on Instagram

[home »](#)



Star Tribune offers digital subscriptions

[news graphics »](#)



Interactive map: Finding best gas prices in metro

[vita.mn »](#)



The Restaurant Guide 2012

LG "THE LG OPTIMUS G IS WHAT ALL ANDROID HANDSETS SHOULD STRIVE TO BE." **\$99⁹⁹** **LG optimus G** **BUY NOW**

StarTribune



[News](#) [Local](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [Politics](#) [Opinion](#) [Lifestyle](#) [Entertainment](#) • [Obituaries](#) [Classifieds](#) [Autos](#) [Housing](#)

[Jobs](#)

425 Portland Av. S.
Minneapolis, MN 55488

(612) 673-4000

Company

[About the StarTribune](#)
[Advertising](#)
[Directory + Contacts](#)
[Jobs at the StarTribune](#)
[Newspaper in Education](#)
[Vita.mn: Entertainment Business Listings](#)

Subscriber Services

[Newspaper Subscriptions](#)
[Digital Access](#)
[eEdition](#)
[Vacation Holds/Billing](#)
[Newsletters](#)

Website

[Terms of Use](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Ad Choices](#)
[Site Index](#)

Buy Ads

[Online Ads](#)
[Newspaper Ads](#)
[Classifieds](#)

Store

[Article Archives](#)
[Back copies](#)
[Commercial Reprints](#)
[Permissions](#)

Connect with Us

[Contact Us](#)
[Send a press release](#)
 [Become a Fan](#)
 [Follow Us](#)
 [RSS](#)

-
-  Newspaper Subscriptions
 - |
 -  eEdition
 - |
 -  RSS
 - |
 -  Newsletters