The Batman Comes to Class: Popular Culture as a Tool for Addressing Reflexive Pain

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, a case study approach is used to examine ways in which comics and graphic narratives can be used to provide a context within which undergraduate students may theorize about culture. The authors employed *Batman: Year One* as an organizing narrative for students to theorize about culture and communication. Specifically, students were challenged to (1) understand applications of communication theory in the context of graphic narrative, (2) use graphic narrative as a space for theorizing about communication and culture outside of comics, (3) utilize narrative theory to extrapolate meaning from complex, multi-modal forms of communication. While this case study is situated within the Communication Discipline, the project may be customized to fit courses related to Rhetoric (English), Narrative Theory, or Critical/Cultural Studies.

Keywords: popular culture pedagogy; Batman; graphic narratives; comics; Narrative Theory; Critical/Cultural Studies, communication

Teachers who address critical/cultural topics in the classroom are undoubtedly familiar with the emotional pain that students may encounter in the process of self-discovery. Critical pedagogue, bell hooks described pain in the context of the classroom as being a vulnerability for both students and teachers in addressing cultural tensions. By "exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom", teachers sometimes feel the sting of resulting "chaos and confusion" (hooks, "Teaching to Transgress" 30). What is meant by "pain" in the classroom is that reflexivity regarding positionality may be an existentially threatening process for students and teachers alike? Put another way: people may feel guilty, hurt, oppressed or a range of other emotionally impactful experiences when discovering how quintessential communications may work to reinforce structures of power. These feelings, while arguably necessary in furthering education, are often the result of realizations regarding moral culpability tied to power, position, and privilege. Details of tying critical explorations to course content and the use of tactics to excavate critical analysis will be discussed later in this essay.

hooks has met with some success in overcoming this pain ("Teaching to Transgress" 42-43) by utilizing case examples from media, such as film and television, as a field for topical exploration. By employing recent and well-known examples of communication encounters among fictional characters, hooks is able to connect her students to one another through a common, "popular" culture ("Teaching Community" 34-36).

While some instructors have expressed success regarding the incorporation of popular culture narratives in their classrooms, little work has been done toward describing exactly how these narratives function in the classroom. This essay strives to "create theory from the location of pain and struggle" in the classroom by arguing that popular narratives are useful in addressing the pain of reflexivity (hooks "Teaching to Transgress" 74). Specifically, graphic narrative will be presented as a productive field of play in which to objectively address challenging topics before making more subjective and reflexive applications. This essay will offer a rationale for the pedagogical potential of graphic narrative, present the details of a sample project using graphic narration as a learning tool, and discuss the outcomes of employing the project.

RATIONALE

Graphic narratives provide advantages to the higher education classroom by contributing to "safe" environments for exploring sensitive cultural topics (e.g., Cook and Frey; Krusemark; Rahman and Zeglin; Zehr). Uncovering playful environments for students is valuable for education in several ways. First, the traditional "uncertainty reduction model" (Berger and Calabrese 101-109), which is frequently employed in educational contexts treats exclusion of data as the acquisition of knowledge. In order to cultivate an appreciation for novelty and discovery, educators might acknowledge play as "the force of uncertainty which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual" toward "innovation and creativity" (Bial 135). Environments which "involve… 'real' words and actions that are paradoxical 'not-real' because they are 'framed' within the context of play" are useful for learning because they permit a sort of practice exploration of concepts before asking students to make more serious applications (Bial 135). Critical communication pedagogues, Fassett and Warren, viewed the use of performance concepts, such as play, as being pedagogically desirable when they articulated that "performative theories are valuable in education because they help us see the stable, the taken-for-granted, the assumed as enactments, as processual, as historical, and as contextual" (75). In other words, performance and play help learners to see patterns/rituals (certainties) in the world around them by encountering ambiguity and unexplored terrain (uncertainties). Encountering play may require exploring fields outside of the immediate classroom, though – fields that might be either fictional or "real." In advocating for YouTube as a pedagogical field, Kellner and Kim aptly noted that "the real value of education as self-realization can never be confined to a class" (16). This essay posits that, like YouTube for Kellner and Kim, comics might provide learning space for communication content experimentation that is accessible both inside and outside of the classroom.

Educators have already published a number of volumes dedicated to the study of popular culture as a part of pedagogy (e.g., Bukingham). Many scholars are dedicated to studying specific areas of popular culture, such as comic books (e.g., Dong; Gerde and Foster). Dong's edited volume, for instance, is committed to exploring strategies for analyzing comics through a critical lens. A plethora of articles probes similar concepts, such as Cook and Fey's "Using Superheroes to Visually and Critically Analyze Comics, Stereotypes, and Society." Other articles have demonstrated more content specificity, generally maintaining critical approaches but applying pop culture toward particular disciplinary content. For example, Rahman and Zeglin's "Holy Psychopathology Batman: The Pedagogical Use of Comic Books in the Teaching of Abnormal Psychology" featured a discussion of how psychology students might benefit from creating case studies and diagnoses of fictional characters. (Langley's book, "Batman and Psychology" advocated a similar approach to the one employed by Rahman and Zeglin.) Krusemark's work in the area of leadership also aptly conveys how popular culture might be pedagogically employed in topic or discipline-specific areas. For example, in her article "Teaching with Batman and Sherlock: Exploring Student Perceptions of Leadership Using Fiction, Comic Books, and Jesuit Ideals" Krusemark argued for the benefits of comics in the classroom by explaining, "Variety in reading, for the 21st century student, includes daily communications with not only text, but also visuals. Comic books, as popular culture readings, are multimodal readings that include text *and* visuals" (73, emphasis added). She further explained that her particular application comics included asking students to interrogate the leadership qualities of superheroic characters, such as Batman. The exemplary work of scholars such as those mentioned throughout this section demonstrates that scholars both find popular culture artifacts to be beneficial pedagogical tools and are hard at work determining the most valuable ways to leverage popular culture for particular disciplinary content. However, despite the array of literature dedicated to knowledge regarding popular culture in a plentitude of disciplines, surprisingly little work examines how comic books operate as communication media or the multiple, intersecting modes of communication that diffuse comic book myths. Interest in the communicative functions of comics appears to be rising. For example, Brooker wrote volumes on the cultural history of Batman mythos. Work in the vein of Brooker's interests remains largely untapped, though. Comics, including superhero myths, hold the potential to engage audiences in multiple levels of learning through their multimodal communication (Botzakis 118-121, Krusemark 73), emphasizing the need to study what pedagogical techniques might be developed as related to these unique popular media and their communicative functions. For instance, playful fields for communication content engagement, such as comics, may act as a learning transition between cultural ignorance and the awareness that comes with the emotional pain described by hooks ("Teaching to Transgress" 74). According to hooks, this pain emerges in reaction to increasing personal reflexivity from critical inquiry.

One way that popular narratives are helpful in addressing the pain of reflexivity is by employing a pseudo-method of "academicizing" (Fish 27). Fish proposed that "to academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency… and insert it into the context of academic urgency" (27). Fish aimed his theory at reducing emotional investments in the classroom in favor of performing objective analysis. Generally speaking, Fish's intended applications would be contrary to the beliefs of critical pedagogues and are not holistically recommended by these authors; however, a temporary academicization of content may work to set the stage for a productive post-academicized discussion of critical topics and ease the blow of potential guilt associated with such discussions. There is precedent for such a model in comics studies, even though the technique has been subject to little research and writing. For example, regarding his experience with using comic books in the classroom, Hoeppner proposed an "approach [that] looks somewhat similar to critical theory, [but] is somewhat different in that it does not necessarily carry an ideological agenda of its own, but rather strives to take a step back and look at the texts critically – but with an open mind" (182). True critical pedagogues would, of course, not stop with the introduction of the fictional field of play, leaving students

without guidance in unpacking content, like Hoeppner. Instead, teachers, in keeping with the instructional aims and values of their pedagogy, should follow-up academicized explorations of fictional fields of play with conversations comparing and contrasting student experiences toward social problem-solving (Fassett and Warren 37-60).

The reason popular culture stories are ideal is that they contextualize true-life problems in the realm of fiction, which seem to somewhat release the issues from their real-world urgency for a period of time in which readers can process information through playful engagement. For example, in her discussion of fairy tales – a form of fictive popular narrative – Kelley argued that popular fictional stories "reflect society and culture by showing different ways of being" (40). In other words, engagement with fictional contexts encourages empathy with characters in imagined settings – settings that may also be reflective of those familiar to readers in their face-to-face communications. Further, Harmon and Henkin more recently found similar results regarding the instructive nature of popular culture while training graduate student teachers to use young adult books as teaching tools. Harmon and Henkin's work was specifically geared toward the end of teaching critical/cultural concepts – in this case, social justice. Their study found that instructors who used young adult books to contextualize social justice discussions with students were more able to articulate concrete examples of social inequity after their use of the book than before their incorporation of popular culture. Particularly, Harmon and Henkin found that "participants' definitions of social justice changed from general ideas to more detailed understandings of the concept" by the use of young adult books. We posit that Kelley's overall argument regarding the importance of teaching critical analysis in fictional fields of play should be extended from young children to include adult learners as well. Harmon and Henkin's study reinforces this argument by communicating the combined benefits for adults – both teachers and learners – in using fictional fields of play. For children and adults alike, aesthetic distance – a step toward academicization – is maintained by the illusion of fiction and therefore functions as a playful context of exploration. Research (e.g., Botzakis) has also been completed specifically tying comics to these learning benefits, which will be addressed later in this essay. Again, though: using popular narratives alone is too detached from true-life discussions to be *sufficiently* critical. The pain of cultural topics such as power, positionality, and privilege cannot be fully addressed until the topics are made personal. Teachers *must* still encourage students to look for solutions to problems that may be actualized in the communities in which the learners belong.

Toward the end of developing teaching strategies for education that utilize comics as fields of play for content, the remainder of this essay will largely act as a reflection on the ways that graphic narrative – particularly Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* ("Year One") – was applied to the introductory communication course as a semester-long endeavor.

CASE STUDY OBJECTIVES

We utilize a case study approach to demonstrate praxis in the classroom. Robert K. Yin argued that the researcher's experience in the field of inquiry informs their insights to the inquiry. Thus, researchers are embedded as part of the case study. Furthermore, Yin explained that previous literature and research should provide theoretical guidance in case studies. Additionally, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt designed a theory-building approach using case studies, which demonstrates the importance of enfolding previous research into cases in order to allow for theoretical development (533). Thus, existing research on the use of popular culture and higher education and narrative theory forms a lens of analysis to demonstrate the theoretical and practical implications of the Batman course.

Year One acted as a springboard for discussion in all five units of our basic communication course: foundations, public speaking, rhetoric and advocacy, interpersonal and organizational contexts, and performance and culture. This case study is drawn from an Introduction to Communication course taught at a

large southwestern university over two semesters with four different groups of students. The 112 students who participated in the course came from a variety of majors primarily from the College of Business and College of Library Arts and Social Sciences. The majority of students were freshmen (62%), while the remaining were sophomores (25%), juniors (7%), and seniors (8%). Specific demographics regarding gender, age, and race were not collected. The course fulfills a core-course requirement but is one of several options students have to earn core credit.

The faculty and staff involved in teaching the basic course employ a critical communication approach (Fassett and Warren 27). Therefore, in addition to teaching skills such as the basics of public speaking, approaches for interpersonal conflict resolution, and strategies for effective group communication, we also encourage students to think about how power is used and structures of power may be manifested in our mundane communications. One tactic for opening discussion on culture in the basic course is to introduce popular culture narratives as examples and/or fields of play.

In this particular instance, we incorporated popular culture narratives in the introductory communication course with the utilization of Miller's *Year One*. The learning objectives for incorporating *Year One* – include: motivating and engaging students with stories about a popular character (hooks "Teaching Community" 34-36), offering a case study (Svinicki and McKeachie 44-45) with thematic unity for consistency and context, and providing a way for students to trace their own lived narrative progression (Gravley, Richardson, and Allison 20-21). More simply: the graphic narrative helps facilitate a classroom climate that can explore the application of course concepts and offers a useful "jumping off" point for investigation of other various forms of communication.

Year One specifically connects with critical classroom objectives because Batman is a character who is principally concerned with justice and ethical questions embedded in explorations of justice (White and Arp 5 – 37). Miller's story is about two young protagonists – a policeman named Jim Gordon and a wealthy recluse/vigilante named Bruce Wayne – who learn to collaborate with one another in addressing criminal activity in fictional Gotham City. Each character uses dramatically different methods in their attempts to make Gotham a safer place and each one wrestles with the ethics of their actions in pursuit of a greater good. In the pages of *Year One*, several social concerns are explicitly addressed including racism, police (and other government) corruption, cycles of violence, and social justice methodology. Other critical/cultural interests are also implicitly addressed in Miller's text, such as the significance of history/context in understanding how social concerns are framed. This implicit issue of context may also inspire questions regarding the methods of history-keeping and telling.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

There is precedent for the use of comic books to educate adult learners. Gerde and Foster (abstract), have used issues of X-Men to teach business ethics. They argued that "the strengths of the [comic book] pedagogy include crossing cultural barriers, understanding the complexity of individual decision-making and organizational influences, and the universality of dilemmas and values" (Gerde and Foster abstract). Comics, then, are ideal case studies for problem-based learning (Svinicki and McKeachie 207-209), which are useful for critical inquiry. The andragogical potential of graphic narrative has also been elaborated on by Botzakis, who worries that "schools in the United States risk irrelevance by rejecting certain text types out of hand and restricting what counts as a text worthy of instructional use" (114). His interviews with adult comics readers recognize that comic books are still stigmatized in the United States – as also confirmed in a study by Lopes (abstract) – even though readers often access multiple dimensions of learning through them, including "critical, moral, literary and dialogic dimensions" (Botzakis abstract). He discovered that, despite

stigmatization of the medium, comic book stories still provided readers with tools that "helped… make sense of life events" and to "reflect on [their] own social world" (119). Essentially, the participant[s] "used comic books as theory-building tools" by using fictional contexts to ponder the application of true-life social action. More recent research has also generalized these findings to other superhero genre stories as well. For example, Callens found that TV adaptations of comics such as *The Walking Dead* (Darabont et al) acted as excellent contexts for examining psychology of needs, ultimately concluding that "what makes popular culture case studies not only fun but also highly effective, is they are often hyperbolic" which means that "students can easily identify with the [content] concepts being studied" (abstract). In a separate study, Neely explained why *The Walking Dead*'s hyperbolic genre qualities may be beneficial in education by probing pedagogical potentialities in the show's most dire social circumstances. He concluded that the extreme circumstances of the show offered multiple dimensions of teaching/learning to the audience. More simply: in the case of our project, we were pleased to use a story that could potentially reap benefits via form (graphic narrative) and genre (superhero).

The selection of a Batman story was strategic. The literature on Batman as a cultural icon has already been produced in communication studies (Brooker) and by scholars from other related fields, such as psychology and philosophy. As Langley argued, Batman is no doubt the most psychologically driven (5 - 7) and philosophically interesting character in superherodom. Batman's peculiar position as both a psychologically driven and rhetorically presented icon leaves narratives about the character open to accessing multiple areas of communication studies.

Therefore, in addition to the standard textbook, we had students read *Year One* and readings on comics theory. The supplemental readings (Langley; McCloud; Rhodes and Johnson; White and Arp) were used to link comics theory to course content. For example, one regularly discussed topic in the basic communication course is perception. The process of perception, involving a personal collection of information from context and the framing of this information using past experience, is easily explained using McCloud's notion of "closure." According to McCloud, closure allows readers to "mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" between comics panels, essentially slowing down and making the perception process – using experience to make sense of communication moments – blatant and visible (67). When studying the topic of perception in communication, we referred to *Year One* for specific examples of closure at work and use chapters from McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to bridge the comics example with communication theory on perception. Significantly, the comics example gave students more than standard orthographic text for understanding perception. Through *Year One* and *Understanding Comics*, students had a visual representation of a perception model. This visual representation offered students multiple processing tools for broaching the topic of perception, including the highly concrete orthographic language, more iconic visual language through comics images, and contextual sense-making via experiencing multiple words and images working in concert with one another. Comics engaged students both verbally and nonverbally, which more closely mirrors face-to-face communication experiences than simply reading out of a textbook.

Perhaps more importantly, *Year One* served as a semester-long case study. *Year One* was ultimately a popular and accessible narrative that students could refer to for examples of communication concepts throughout the semester. By starting discussions with a common example, we were able to observe that students during the "Batman semester" more easily navigated controversial and potentially painful cultural topics. Personal stories from students' previous cultural experiences seemed to be more clearly and easily communicated to classmates if the related communication theory was paired to a common, fictional example before personal self-disclosures began.

Assignments. Six major assignments (two of which were exams over general course content) were assigned in addition to online journals. Students completed two major speech projects: a "super-self" informative speech in which students introduce their interests and hobbies (what makes them "super" or unique) and a "Hero's Journey" persuasive speech in which students propose ways they may apply their "super power[s]"/talents/interests from the first speech toward public advocacy in some way. The speeches work together to promote reflexivity and the eventual realization of agency in the form of in-class advocacy presentations. Students are also required to write two essays: an interpersonal analysis of Batman characters and a narrative analysis of *Year One*. The first essay creates safe opportunities for students to practice solving interpersonal conflict using communication theory. The second essay asks students to excavate arguments and values from rhetorical artifacts. All of the assignments are geared toward giving students space to practice the application of communication theory before asking them to think about how those applications may transfer to true-life experiences. Details of these assignments will be explained in the Activities & Class Discussions section below.

Activities & Class Discussions. A discussion was the primary instructional techniques used in order to help students develop an understanding of the ways in which the course concepts were at play in *Year One* and to prepare for their assignments. Students would read a chapter from an introductory communication textbook each week. Over four weeks (corresponding to the four chapters of the graphic novel) – once every two weeks after the start of the course – students would additionally read a chapter from *Year One*. The instructor facilitated class discussions every week following a general question order, 1) ensured student recall of concepts from the communication textbook, 2) invited location and investigation of communication textbook concepts in the context of the *Year One* plot, 3) prompted analysis of plot points using communication terms or theory, 4) called for evaluation of character communications in *Year One*, and 5) asked for student application of communication concepts in domains outside of the *Year One* book. Discussions also became more complex and students demonstrated competencies beyond those that were just listed; however, the enumeration given should serve to demonstrate the basic starting structure utilized by instructors in conducting a class discussion.

In order to explain how these class discussions produced unique points of interest in communication content or prepared students for major assignments, a brief summary of *Year One* is warranted. Miller's book basically retold the original story of the Batman character, drawing from Finger & Kane's (1939) seminal introduction of Batman but also filling in details and expanding on the earlier story. *Year One* is the story of two crime fighters in fictional Gotham City: Bruce Wayne and James "Jim" Gordon. Bruce is a wealthy Gotham socialite who, at the start of the story, has just returned from a long trip to Asia. Jim is a police sergeant in Gotham who is wrestling with the obvious corruption in his department. He wants to help reduce crime in Gotham, but structural problems (i.e.., the corruption of his captain and the city commissioner) generate difficulties in making enduring change. Bruce, trained as a ninja during his travels, hopes to fulfill a vow to his murdered parents that he would wage war on the criminals of Gotham City. In an attempt to induce dread in the criminals he intended to fight, Bruce donned tactical armor fashioned after the likeness of a bat (an archetype inspired by a vision Bruce experienced in an injured, and perhaps medicated state). Bruce's vigilante activity as the "Bat-Man" frequently impinged on the illegal operations of the corrupt Gotham City Police Department officers. During his "war on crime," Bruce/Batman realizes that Jim does not participate in the illegal activities engaged by many other Gotham officers and they strike up a loose partnership. The partnership basically functions by Batman disrupting the operations of corrupt police while Jim uses the law to combat Gotham criminality without serious structural barriers. The major conflicts of the story include Bruce's questioning of his endurance to keep his vow and Jim's moral uncertainty about working with a

vigilante. Themes about police brutality, the tension between legal justice and alternative modes of justice, and the role of ethnicity and socioeconomic status in framing justice are all prominent in the story.

Year One gave storied examples of individuals in conflict with broad social forces (e.g., the criminal justice system or economy). The social structures described in the narrative were strategically leveraged for our introduction to communication course with an emphasis on critical/culture studies. The class discussion yielded conversation about themes such as justice. For instance, the corruption of the Gotham City Police Department pressed students to call the morality of the American criminal justice system into question. At the same time, the brutality of Batman's vigilante methods and the fact that Batman does not operate under formal social boundaries indicated problems with individualistic, alternative modes of justice as well. Students grappled with what constitutes justice and the role that communication plays in enacting justice. Critical communication concepts such as empathy, advocacy, and dialogic engagement played key roles in these conversations. In addition to exploring the cross-section of communication and justice, classes often steered the discussion in ways that compared true-life events to plot tensions from *Year One*. For instance: several "Batman classes" were conducted around the time that Michael Brown, jr., an unarmed 18-year-old person of color, had been shot down by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Students were able to facilitate talk about the subjects of police brutality and racism by speaking in terms of the actions of *Year One* character, Detective Flass. The character is Jim Gordon's police partner and is portrayed as an overtly racist officer in Miller's book. The story provided an opportunity for students to springboard into conversations about police racism. In addition to police brutality, racism, and the cross-sections thereof, students also used Miller's narrative to address concerns related to violence, homelessness, relationship fidelity, and environmental care.

Accomplishing productive student discussions about matters such as justice and power was a key instructional objective of the teachers; however, the plan for this class was to also take matters a step beyond mere discussion. Class conversations provided students with conceptual and theoretical tools for completing major course assignments – including activities with advocacy foci. Three major assignments, one paper and two speeches, were employed during the "Batman classes," in addition to periodic examinations. The paper asked students to examine an interpersonal conflict between characters in a Batman story. Class discussion regarding *Year One* gave students the opportunity to practice taking textbook concepts (such as models of interpersonal communication or theories of interpersonal conflict) and applying them to story characters. This assignment basically asked students to take the sort of analysis modeled in-class meetings and apply it on their own. Meanwhile, the speech assignments worked together, relying on a superhero theme, to jointly promote critical thinking about the role of the self in advocacy for social change. The first speech assigned asked students to talk about their own "superpower" – something that they identified as a personal interest or talent. Discussion from *Year One* prepared students for the first speech by encouraging them to explore the virtues and vices of each character and the values that they represented. For instance, Jim Gordon does not have any superpowers in the traditional sense; however, his strength as a character who aspires toward heroism is that he seems to legitimately care about other people. In other words, we could tell that Jim's empathy was essentially his "superpower." Students were encouraged to think along these lines in order to develop a notion of their own strengths for the first speech assignment. Afterward, during the second speech assignment later in the semester, students were asked to speak about how they could apply their superpower to help with an issue that was important to them. This speech was persuasive in nature and featured a clear advocacy component because students were expected to research how they could get involved with an issue. During the second set of speeches, students frequently gave examples of using their superpowers in their own lives to promote communal good. For example, some students – noticing the heavy smog of Gotham City in *Year One* – investigated environmental health concerns. Based on this research, they proposed that their superpower was something akin to endurance or mindfulness. Therefore, in their final speech, they discussed

how commitment to (endurance with) new lifestyle habits, such as improved garbage disposal and recycling behaviors, would assist them with cultivating and maintaining environmentally healthier life choices. They also spoke passionately about their new commitments and used their speech to explain their position to their classmates, including: 1) why they felt so strongly about making changes after researching environmental health concerns and 2) describing how others could make changes in relevant areas of their lives as well.

Throughout the course, *Year One* essentially served as a context or field of play in which students could think about applications for the communication content that they were learning from their textbooks. Class discussions blending content from both the textbook and Miller's *Year One* prepared students for accomplishing larger class assignments by giving them opportunities to talk through complex communication phenomena and providing practice for later class activities.

DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, our experience was that students in the "Batman Class" indeed felt more comfortable when first discussing critical/cultural topics in the context of fiction and then true-life, than other students who did not theory-build using popular culture. In the Batman/Communication course, a handful of students in each section were hesitant to use comic books at the start of the class. Not every student had been exposed to graphic narrative in their previous experience. On the other hand, we also encountered a few avid Batman fans who were incredibly enthusiastic – so much so that they occasionally needed to be reminded to refer only to the story that the whole class had read instead of accessing their full bat-knowledge. After practicing the application of communication theory on *Year One*, students had little trouble linking theory to discussions of true-life applications. The "Hero's Journey" speech that most prominently asks students to "narratize" (Allison 121) – tell future-oriented stories – about true-life uses for communication theory was, by-and-large, successful as a bridge between the fiction/reality gap in discussion of critical communication praxis. The observed outcomes are significant because students clearly communicated their connections with fictional content, applied the concepts learned through fictional fields of play in face-to-face scenarios and acknowledged ways to continue using course content in out-of-class contexts. Popular culture acted as a unique facilitating function in that *Year One* was both individually and communally explored by students, who co-created goals for how to behave in the world outside of the comic by using the text as an imaginative playground. In short, *Year One* served to encourage students to be reflexive regarding common narratives from other sources (e.g., conceptions of people of color, police, and others learned from family, TV, books, etc. which were surfaced in the comic book) and then plot future action based on more conscious acceptance or rejection of previously internalized narratives.

The outcomes associated with meeting the learning objectives should be considered the greatest strengths of the course – specifically, discussions on potentially "painful" subjects seem to indeed be more quickly and easily breached in the context of fictional narrative, making more personal critical discussions more productive in future lessons. Content knowledge gathered from fictional fields of play were also easily cross-applied to face-to-face interpersonal scenarios by most students. Some limitations of the project include: time taken to orient classes both to the selected graphic narrative and to comics theory, increased course readings (drain on student time/energy), and delays in an interpersonal content application. In other words, course content is more slowly personalized to students' lives when increased readings and fields of play are introduced (a benefit or limitation, depending on one's pedagogical style). Also, *Year One* is not without its own critical problems. A critique of Miller's treatment of socioeconomics, privilege, and/or race may be called into question by the instructor or students. Potentially problematic areas in a rhetorical artifact also provide an excellent opportunity for discussion, though, and might act as problem-posing scenarios for application of critical ethics. In keeping with the previously discussed Freirean framework, we relied on principles of

the pedagogy of the oppressed to guide our framing in the class. Freire's praxis is ideal for framing popular culture narrative responses because his principles of dialogue emphasize communal action – a necessity for successful classroom climate and cohesion.Particularly, students were encouraged to find praxical solutions to the problem-posing scenarios by first realizing oppression, then dialoguing as a class community in order to theorize potential solutions, and, finally, setting goals for ethical future action.

Additionally, we caution teachers using superhero stories to have clear and early discussions of the intended aesthetic distance between exaggerated realities of fiction and face-to-face communication encounters with others. Most importantly, a discussion of violence as allegory, as opposed to a legitimate communication solution for social ails, is recommended as a precursor to utilizing superhero stories in the classroom. A discussion of critical communication ethics and commitments (Fassett and Warren 37-60) may be a helpful way to frame reading superhero stories. Students should be aware that advocacy tools such as dialogue are preferable to the physical violence found in many popular stories. Fortunately, the need for such discussion is in-line with the aims of critical inquiry. Such is one example of the great potential for critical pedagogues to turn limitations into opportunities.

This essay has warranted theoretical ground for the use of comics in critical/cultural studies, expounded on the potential benefits of comics as a learning tool, and offered brief examples of how the suggested use of comics may be actualized. The aims of the essay were more toward carving theoretical space for the inclusion of comics in critical pedagogy than to provide instructions for how to enact the use of comics in the classroom; however, other work has been done to more thoroughly explore the actual implementation of comics in communication courses (e.g., Hammonds and Anderson-Lain, 2016). Many collections, such as the afore-mentioned Dong (2012), also already exist to provide a specific discussion of how to concretely implement lesson plans regarding topics in the purview of critical pedagogy, including ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, cultural studies, and composition, rhetoric, and communication. Future research in this area should be praxical, surfacing links between critical pedagogy, comics theory, and research and praxis within a variety of disciplines.

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