

Title of Session: Make Belief Comix
Moderator: Bill Zimmerman
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Room: The Art of Storytelling Group

LoriPP joined the room.

BillZ: Where are you from Lori?

LoriPP: Clayton, NC

BillZ: Welcome! I'm glad you came.

LoriPP: Thanks.

LoriPP: Where are you, Bill?

BillZ: I'm from New York City and I had a great day today. I teach a writing class to immigrants and we wrote about love today. So, Spring is very much on my mind.

BJB2: aw www... I didn't realize you were such a romantic, Bill!

BillZ: It's all the sunshine and flowers blooming and the heavy winter clothes coming off. I'm starting to feel free again and healthy.

JeffC joined the room.

JeffC waves

BillZ: Hi, Jeff.

BillZ: Where are you from, Jeff?

BJB2: Since this is Lori's first Tapped In discussion, perhaps you should explain what the topic is, Bill, and give some background info?

BJB2 . o O (Jeff is in Oregon)

JeffC: from Berkeley originally

BillZ: Sure, I launched a web site called MakeBeliefsComix.com two years ago, where you can create your own comics strips online. It encourages students to write, read and tell stories. I hope you'll look at it. It gives them fun characters with different moods,

blank talk and thought balloons to fill in, story prompts and printables to write and draw with.

BillZ: Many educators around the world who teach English use the site to do so. It's a fun way to learn and experiment with language and to use one's imagination.

LoriPP: I struggle with how to help English language learners with writing and how to motivate them to write, so this is great.

BillZ: Comics are a wonderful way of learning because the balloons are finite in size and the text doesn't overwhelm the reluctant writers or readers.

BillZ: I learned how to read as a boy while lying on the living room floor and reading the wonderful Sunday comics.

TraceyM joined the room.

BillZ: I'm also finding that parents of autistic children are also using the comic strips to teach their children social skills, such as practicing what to say when you meet someone new, such as introducing yourself and offering your name.

BJB2: hi, Tracey. Welcome

BillZ: Hi, Tracey.

TraceyM: Thanks, first time trying to do this. Sorry I'm late.

BillZ: Do any of you use comics in your own classrooms to encouraging reading and writing?

LoriPP: Not lately. I remember using comics years ago when I started teaching first grade. My interest in using them has been renewed!

BillZ: I hope you'll try out my comic generator web site -- www.makebeliefscomix.com - with your students and create some of your own comic strips.

TraceyM: I haven't been in the classroom for a long time. I'm hoping to work with a preschool ESL group next year. Any good ideas for using comics in that setting?

SusanR joined the room.

BillZ: Recently, we added a Teacher Resources function to the site which gives you many activities you do with your children in using comics. For example, it would be fun at the beginning of the term to have them create a comic strip introducing themselves to their fellow students, showing their interests, talking about their name or family.

BillZ: Another idea, if you're teaching vocabulary, would be to have students create a comic strip in which they write text incorporating the new words.

BJB2: for preschool you could show the comics and discuss what is happening...or what happens next

BJB2 . o O (you do the writing for them and then they have their own published comics!)

BillZ: Sure, and each of the comic characters on the site have four different emotions, and you can select the emotion you want. So, for a young student it is a way to teaching them about the different emotions and the expressions.

BJB2 agrees. Good idea, Bill

LoriPP: Vocabulary, sequencing, retelling stories, character development, setting, and the list goes on. I'm starting to see how comics can help in so many ways.

BillZ: Good idea, BJB. When I was a young father my daughter loved to tell stories and when I'd come home from work, she would dictate them to me and I would type them up right in front of her eyes. It gave her a sense of power and accomplishment.

TraceyM: Good points! Sequencing, feelings, vocab practice are all big in preschool.

BJB2 . o O (not bad for your first Tapped In discussion, Lori!)

SusanR: great idea .. do you have any examples from students, Bill?

BillZ: I don't have them online. But sometimes, when I'm working with adults we create comic strips about going for a job interview in which they use characters to show them as job applicants answering and asking questions of characters who represent the employer. It's a way of practicing language and gaining confidence in what could be asked at an interview.

BJB2 . o O (a reminder to Lori and Tracey that you will be emailed a transcript of this text chat when you log out)

SusanR . o O (students study jobs/careers or have a career day)

BillZ: I don't know if you have access to the site as we talk, but if you do, you will find a button called Story Ideas which gives you a lot of ideas for subjects for comic strips, such as My Three Wishes, and to create a comix answering that question. Then you can have students compare their wishes with those of the others.

TraceyM: Thanks! I was wondering how I'd remember it all! I can imagine the interview comic taking some of the stress out of practicing for that situation.

BillZ: I remember a mother who had to go to a parent-teacher's meeting that evening to discuss her daughter's problems with the teacher. She spoke Spanish as her first language and was worried about the words and expressions she would use. And we went over some of them in the form of a comic strip.

BillZ: Also, I often have students work together in teams when creating an online comic strip. This results in team building and one student may be great in using the computer, and another great in coming up with ideas, and a third student great in knowing which words to use.

LoriPP: It's like a dress rehearsal before the performance. Students can formulate speech, write it down, practice it, and then use it. Awesome.

BillZ: Students also have the option of printing their comics and also sending them as emails to friends and relatives. So imagine a kid learning English and creating a strip that she sends to her grandmother for her birthday illustrating her message of love.

BJB2: The reason I placed this discussion in the Art of Storytelling group room is that the sequencing of comics is a version of storyboarding

BillZ: By printing out their comics and doing this each week or with some regularity, kids can build up a portfolio of work that traces their development and improvement in language skills.

BJB2 . o O (storyboards are the foundation of movies, ppt, etc.)

BillZ: Many teachers have students create a storyboard of a play or book they are reading.

SusanR: exactly

BillZ: Through the comic strips, they can use the different comic characters as surrogates for the characters in the book or play. They can then also extend the endings of the stories and have the characters continue their lives.

SusanR: could they write a short graphic novel

BJB2: cool idea, Sue

BillZ: Sure, what they're doing is building a daily or weekly serial and have the characters keep developing and attempting new adventures and storylines.

SusanR: so each time they enter the computer lab they could continue it

SusanR: or make it a home/school connection

BillZ: Right now, we have 15 characters and plan to add five more. We are also creating "objects" which they can use with the characters, such as trees, environments, balls, pizza slices, and these objects will help them bring variety to the stories.

LoriPP: Like characters who have multiple books about them and you can't wait to read the next adventure. Very motivating!

BillZ: Many teachers ask their students to create a comic strip for homework on a class assignment and mail it back to the teacher that night so the teacher can review their work. Everything can be done via email, if you like.

TraceyM: They could even create one of those books where you choose what happens next and flip to a page with that sequence

BillZ: We added a new Printables button to help teachers that don't have classroom access to computers. On this page are templates with characters and blank balloons that can be printed out and students can fill in to create their own stories by hand if they like.

LoriPP: So students can actually type the text in the comix and then print it out?

LoriPP: I'm trying to integrate technology, but I have one computer.

SusanR: great for a rough copy

BillZ: Yes, the balloons accepts type in English and languages such as Spanish, French, Italian, German, Portuguese.

BJB2: Make the one computer a station, Lori

LoriPP: Tell me more BJB.

BJB2: break the class into small groups that rotate through activities...reading, crafts, computer

JeffC: have the students prep their comix so their computer time is best spent... or input it yourself.

BillZ: If you have only one computer, but have an LCD that projects you can create a comic strip together with the class. That's often how I demonstrate the site. I ask workshop participants to help me select a characters and to come up with themes, and we build the comic strip together, one panel at a time.

BJB2: older kids can do pre-writing before they get on the computer

JeffC: or do what Bill says!

BJB2: that would also be fun, Bill

BillZ: Then, you can take a completed comic, and ask students to use the comic strip as the basis for a short essay or longer piece.

BillZ: So the comic strip becomes the stepping stone to longer writing. The student begins to build up confidence that she or he can actually put some words and ideas together. Once they can see their work, they feel better about creating more.

TraceyM: I was just thinking about something I'd learned in a culture class. People in different cultures can use facial expressions different from what Americans do. Our tendency to smile a lot can cause confusion. This would be a nice way for ESL students to match appropriate facial expressions with situations.

BillZ: Facial expressions are very important for those who work with autistic children who need to learn what the different expressions mean. So choosing which of the four emotions to use for a character, which the site allows, enables the child to begin learning what each emotion looks like and means.

BillZ: Using comic characters also enables a student to use a character as a surrogate for him or herself and to explore issues that are on their mind, such as how to deal with a bully or a problem at school or at home.

TraceyM: Almost the way puppets are used.

BillZ: If you go to the site you'll find the 15 characters and you could choose which one you want to be for the day. Will I be a cat or dog person, will I be a bird person or a crocodile.

LoriPP: The students can even create the comic strip and then act it out. Practice dialogue.

BJB2: nice analogy, Tracey

BillZ: Great idea! It's important for a student to read her work out loud. It instills pride and allows her to practice language and get used to hearing her voice. Very important for students learning to speak English.

BillZ: The comic strip asks the students to write their name and subject title for the strip. Doing so signifies ownership of the week, which all writers and creators strive for.

BillZ: You can do strips on themes. If you're teaching the environment, for example, you can ask students to create a strip about an environment problem or challenge or to map out a strategy for improve things.

TraceyM: I've found that boys in particular are often unhappy about writing. I can imagine this being a format that they would enjoy.

BillZ: Yes, because the web gives a boy power to create -- all he has to do is put the pictures and words together, and because the balloons are finite, he does not have to feel overwhelmed by language. A few words will convey the message -- writing a comic is almost like writing poetry -- taut and tight and clear and direct.

TraceyM: I also like that fact that this format forces the writer to organize his thoughts--giving some clarity to the writing, rather than trying to fill the required amount of paper.

BillZ: I often do Family Literacy evenings, too, where parents and children either work together to create comic strips or side by side with each having a computer and parent and child helping each other out. Particularly good for immigrant families where the child is ahead of the parent in terms of language -- he can help the parent with the words, and the parent can help with the story ideas.

LoriPP: That's a great idea for our next ESL family night. We can use our computer lab and learning lab.

BillZ: Tracey, your point about clarifying thoughts is very important. When I am tired after a hard day, I'll often look at the comic pages in a newspaper because everything there is succinct and little stories are told in three or four or five panels and are very satisfying. It's truly an art form to create a good comic.

BillZ: It's almost like a graphic haiku if you think of it.

BJB2 . o O (I read the comics every day even when I'm not tired!)

TraceyM: I bet immigrant parents would like to have a concrete way to participate in their child's education

BillZ: On my site, too, is a Writer's Prompt button which connects to my blog page at my other web site, www.BillZtreasurechest.com, in which I post questions during the week which can be used as subjects for essays in the classroom.

BillZ: If students respond to the questions on the blog page I'll post them, so the students can see their work published in a public forum.

LoriPP: Humor is an important element too. Some comics have humorous endings. Kids love to laugh and make others laugh. It's stress relieving as well!

BillZ: I have written many books to help young people express their deepest thoughts and feelings. Most of them use a writing prompt format to help them get started in thinking and writing. My newest book is Pocket Doodles for Kids which encourages kids to draw and also fill in balloons for characters in funny situations. You can see some of the pages

on the Printables page.

LoriPP: I'm so glad there are creative people like you who use their talents to help others, especially children.

TraceyM: Have you tried using comics to teach historical events? Maybe that would require a few more objects. I just think textbooks can be so overwhelming that some students can't even approach the material.

BJB2: and I'm glad that you were willing to be a discussion leader in Tapped In, Bill....we are blessed!

BillZ: When I was a kid, I grew up in a difficult family situation and the way I would cope was by writing and drawing and entering my own world. I felt I didn't have a voice or a say in what was happening, so I started to write books that would help me, and others, speak out about what was going on inside, to find their writers voice.

BillZ: Please try out MakeBeliefsComix.com with your kids and give me some feedback on how I can make it better and more fun for you and them. I am so glad to have had the chance to share these ideas with you. Sincerely.

LoriPP: Thank you, Bill. I will be using this resource very soon.

SusanR . o O (writing is therapeutic)

BJB2 looks at the clock on the wall. We have about 10 minutes left...any final comments, questions?

BillZ: I am interested in having students also be able to write in Asian languages. Would this be helpful for some of your students?

SusanR: Will you be presenting at NECC, Bill?

LoriPP: What is NECC?

BillZ: Could you tell me what NECC is? I'm not sure

SusanR: National Education Computer Conference

LoriPP: When and where?

BJB2 . o O (in Washington, DC this year)

BillZ: That's great to know. Is it a useful conference. Have you attended? Do you know when this year?

BJB2: end of June

BJB2 . o O (June 28-July 1)

LoriPP: I just wanted to comment on Tracey

BillZ: That's so good to know, I will try to attend if possible. I just presented at the TESOL annual convention in Denver and do a lot of local workshops with educators. I could use any help or suggestions you can offer in getting word out about what we're doing. It's a free site -- I just want it to be used by teachers and educators. The site is a pure labor of love.

LoriPP: Tracey's idea...historical comics. That would be very useful.

LoriPP: I think comics can be used for many subjects and purposes. We'll try them out and give you feedback, Bill.

BJB2: we appreciate your work, Bill!

BillZ: When you can, can you take a look at the comic characters and tell me what other type characters you'd like to see? Feedback is so helpful; my email is wmz@aol.com

TraceyM: Thanks so much for all the great ideas. I hope to put a lot of it to use.

JeffC: You might want to join the Webheads in Action group here Bill (and others). It's an international group of ESL/TEFL educators who meet every Sunday at 8a.m. Eastern.

BJB2 . o O (12 noon GMT)

BillZ: Thank you so much. Will do.

SusanR: Thanks Bill

BJB2: Thanks, everyone...wonderful discussion!

BJB2: I look forward to seeing Lori and Tracey at more TI discussions!

BillZ: This was great, and I love looking at the Gather'round the Campfire fire burning at the top of the screen.

BJB2 . o O (now that they've been initiated)

BJB2: you also might want to join this group...tons of story writing resources here

BJB2 waves bye and heads for the MusicShake event

BJB2: Thanks again, Bill