

Comics in school and religious education: How to address diversity, strengthen competences and improve the quality of classroom teaching

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This dissertation aimed to generate a fundamental understanding of the role of comics as a creative and potentially innovative medium for learning contexts. The author explored the pedagogical potential of the medium both in increasing the quality of teaching and learning in today's heterogeneous schools, and in teaching and learning about religious and ethical issues.

It addressed several overarching research questions: How can comics contribute to positive learning processes and competence development? Can comics improve the quality of classroom teaching, and if so, how? How can comics be used to address diversity/heterogeneity? How can comics be utilised to learn about religion in school? Which groups of students can be more actively included in classroom processes through comics? The research connects diverse approaches (pedagogics, teaching research, religious pedagogy, psychology of learning, comic studies), and foregrounds inter- and trans disciplinary relations among concepts, reflections and empirical findings.

The study is split in two sections. In section I the focus lies on the general potential of sequential art to improve the quality of teaching and learning in formal public education, introducing four interwoven dimensions: (1) motivation, 2) competences, 3) cognitive activation and 4) engaging heterogeneity with the following results:

- 1) There is sufficient empirical research and conceptual reflection to support the argument that gender-neutral comics contribute to **intrinsic motivation** and enable a student-centred approach to teaching. When embedded in positive social relations and interactions, some comic's 'fun factor' most likely contributes to a positive atmosphere in the classroom as well.
- 2) Reflecting on **cross-curricula competences**, the research shows that societies worldwide are shifting from text-based literacies to more visual literacies. On this basis, comics offer an excellent resource to learn to decipher word-image relations, and to 'read' and create visual meanings. This includes specific comic literacy, but also goes beyond this to broader multimodal meaning-making processes, in analogue and digital spaces. Drawing on models and empirical studies, it is demonstrated that certain competences can be supported by teaching with comics (e.g., general language competence, visual literacy, deconstructing stereotypes), whereas others cannot (e.g., academic language).

- 3) Drawing on, inter alia, cognitive science, the dissertation argues that comics are particularly suited to **activate students' cognitive processes**, in particular in comparison to audiovisual media, in comparison to purely language based texts, and for those students who have less knowledge about the subject in question.
- 4) As a means of **engaging the visible heterogeneity** in today's classrooms, the dissertation identifies how comics can help broaden the types of texts/media used for teaching and learning, address individual learning styles, intelligences and personal interests, and enable individualised and collaborative learning settings. The relevance of comics for particularly at-risk students, e.g. discriminated or marginalised students, but also specific groups, e.g. poor readers, students with little previous knowledge of curricular topics, physically impaired or students with special education needs, is explored. It is considered, how educational inequality is reproduced and how a more equitable education could be enabled.

Section II turns from broader educational fields to the more focused area of religion as a school subject, exploring when **comics can be relevant for religious education**, for instance in relation to religiosity, transcendentalism, spirituality or the inner search for meaning. The dissertation explores the potential of comics to support the competences and understandings required by curricula in religious education. It highlights the particular **potential of biographies** in teaching about religion.

Again, **findings for 'at-risk' students and the potential of comics to reach specific groups**, including non-religious students, Muslim students, and marginalised students are studied at length. Comics are a specific form of popular media that draws students' lives and experiences into the classroom, offers a novel medium to work with, and includes diverse perspectives into (protestant) religious teaching in public schools.

Drawing on the concepts and research presented thus far, an **in-depth analysis of the comic biographies/graphic novels PERSEPOLIS (Marjane Satrapi) and LIFE AND TIMES OF SCROOGE McDUCK (Don Rosa)** weaves together cultural analysis and educational priorities to explore the potentials of these particular comics in religious education. It explores key issues, aesthetic properties, form and style, and political, cultural, affective, gender, societal, spiritual, religious and ethical dimensions of each comic, before reflecting on how each can be specifically used to address particular issues, competences and challenges in (protestant) religious education.

The conclusion presents twelve arguments, responding to the leading research questions, and summarizing the key findings from the dissertation, **also considering the issues of the production and distribution of comics and it reiterates the need for inter-/transdisciplinary cooperation.**