




**UP, UP
AND
AWAY!**

**USING COMIC
BOOKS FOR
CTE PROGRAM
PROMOTION**

By Craig W. Schutt, Bart Washer & Michelle Conrad



Comic books have come a long way in the past 30 years. Once considered juvenile and disposable, even possibly dangerous, the medium has grown up and is now considered mainstream, acceptable entertainment — even studied as (gasp) literature in some circles. As a self-proclaimed comic book evangelist, I have often pronounced the once-beleaguered funny book an effective and engaging tool for all manner of purposes, including instruction and promotion.

Every spring semester in Springfield, Missouri, Ozarks Technical Community College (OTC) administrators request departments provide a brief overview to college peers in the Annual Program Showcase, an event that allows each program a brief opportunity to stand before their peers and provide some insight into their specific area of instruction. During the 2017 spring semester, the graphic design program took an innovative approach that served multiple objectives (i.e., general information and recruiting).



when handing out a comic book.

An Effective Promotional Tool

The effectiveness of comic books (sometimes referred to in academic circles as sequential art) as a promotional tool has been recognized by segments of the publishing and advertising world since the medium's infancy, and it's not hard to understand why. Often, comic book characters attain celebrity status and are used as spokespersons for various products, businesses and social advocacies. Popeye selling spinach was a picture-perfect fit, and stalwart superheroes such as Batman and Superman have often been featured in comic stories advocating anti-bullying and racial tolerance, for example (not to mention arguably less laudable subjects such as Hostess Twinkies). Such ads are usually presented as sequential art, placed in a comic or within more mainstream media channels, such as magazines, newspapers and online sites.

Four-color celebrity aside, the format's unique juxtaposition of words and pictures, combined with its innate populist appeal, has made comics a welcome addition to many organizations' promotional and educational efforts. The U.S. military recognized their effectiveness as a communication tool as early as World War II, when comic books were less than a decade old. Already a well-established comic book writer and artist, the late Will Eisner was drafted into the second World War and found himself creating comics that helped soldiers learn how to restart a stalled engine, or how hydraulics work. Promotional comics have advertised successfully a dizzying array of products and businesses over the past 80-plus years — everything from The Association of American Railroads to Kentucky Fried Chicken.

When creating promotional materials in the comic book genre, one may desire to acquire the assistance of a comic book professional if the resources are available.

An Illustrated Tour

We had become aware that some students were having difficulty navigating through the sequence of graphic design classes that leads to an associate of arts degree; in fact, students entering our capstone courses frequently indicated that they were still uncertain about how all of the pieces came together for completion. With this in mind, the faculty decided to design a comic book that would take readers on a somewhat fanciful tour of the graphic design program, travelling from the introductory courses to the final required classes. In doing so, faculty would be able to present OTC colleagues with pertinent information about the program for the requisite showcase presentation while also supplying graphic design students with a more engaging method of acquiring information about the program than through the standard course catalog. Additionally, faculty could use the comic book as an advertising tool to be distributed at various promotional events and promoted online.

What resulted was a 12-page, full-color comic book. Graphic design technology students no longer express frustration when figuring out the program's course sequence; the novelty of handing out a comic book during the program showcase effectively engaged fellow OTC teachers and administrators. Perhaps most importantly: Prospective high school and postsecondary students light up when the comic is given to them. Program faculty have distributed various promotional brochures, booklets and pamphlets, and have, personally, observed the less-than-enthusiastic response that leads faculty members to wonder if they're wasting their time. However, you seldom get that sort of reaction

However, although several top-tier comics publishers — most notably, DC Comics and Marvel Comics — offer their services for advertising purposes, it is not necessary (or often affordable or desirable). Neither is it required to contract with an accomplished illustrator who can draw the comic unless you feel strongly that the new comic must be penciled, inked and colored in the traditional sense. When creating *Adventures in Graphic Design Technology*, OTC faculty decided to use photographs instead of drawings, a type of comic book more common in Europe — *fumetti* (literally translated from French as “small puffs of smoke,” referring to the dialogue balloons common to most comics).

A Labor of Fumetti

Having settled on a comic as the medium and *fumetti* as the technique, faculty had several meetings to discuss how the story would tackle the task of clarifying the program's course sequence. The result was an approach that featured two students on a step-by-step (if somewhat imaginative) walk through their courses. With the concept agreed upon, the next step was to write a script.

Comic book scripts have never established a universally accepted format, although they generally resemble movie or television scripts. The amount of detail written within is dependent upon whether the designers will take and gather the photographs for production, or if someone else will create the pages. If one individual serves as both writer and artist, the script may be little more than a page-by-page outline — enough content to keep the designer on track, but not enough to make the actual page construction feel redundant. A different graphic artist may require a detailed, panel-to-panel script.

A rough layout of each page should then be developed, based on the script and drawn on paper. The average number of panels in a comic book page is five, but there is nothing in the rule book that places limitations on how many panels can be used: Some pages can contain a dozen panels, while others, referred to as “splash pages,” can contain a single, full-page panel. The layout does not require great drawing skills, but it is an important first step and should not be skipped. Neither should

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Did You Know?

THE GDT PHOTOGRAPHY OPTION

Certificate of Achievement

- GDT 105 Graphic Design 1
- GDT 115 Typography 1
- GDT 160 Photography 1
- GDT 161 Lighting 1
- GDT 162 Studio Photography
- GDT 163 Photography 2
- GDT 250 Web Page Design
- GDT 264 Creative Concepts

"HIRED ON THE SPOT!"
During the TSA-2015 interview process, a GDT student was hired "for real" by the interviewer!

Associate of Applied Science

- GDT 265 Location Photography
- GDT 266 Video For Photography
- GDT 273 Photo Markets & Business
- GDT 275 Portfolio Design/Professional Practices
- GDT290 Co-Operative Ed/Internship (or Related E.I.)

- ENG 101 Composition 1
- Communication Elective
- Science Elective
- MTH 105 or higher
- PLS 101 American Government & Politics
- Exit Exam

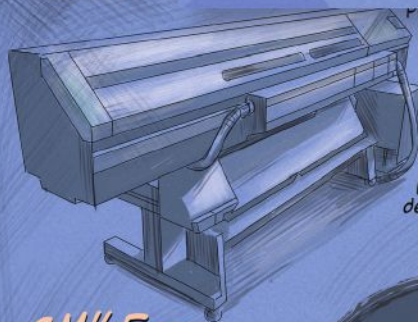
Total Credit hours required for Certificate: 32
Total Credit hours required for Associate of Applied Science: 64

The new GDT Photography Option has been approved by the Missouri Department of Higher Education!

GRAPHIC DESIGN TECH ADVENTURES

An imaginative journey through the Graphic Design Technology program

It is not uncommon for a GDT student — not just those who are entering our program, but even students nearing the end — to express some confusion concerning the sequence of classes they need to take in order to get to the AAS degree. Although the precise order and description of our courses are outlined in the OTC Handbook, we thought it might be helpful to present the GDT program in a more entertaining, engaging manner: thus, the little comic you now hold in your hands. Using a format made popular in Italian comics — *fotoromanzi* (photonovels or fumetti) — our story combines photos with drawings to tell its tale.



Printer is not only (and figuratively) cutting-edge technology, able to simultaneously print, die cut, gloss coat, emboss and perforate students' design projects!

SMILE-- THE PROGRAM IS GROWING!

Beginning Fall 2016, the GDT department is adding a Photography option/certificate/AAS degree, as well as a second photo lab!



"INSTANT" ART DIRECTOR!

A 2014 GDT graduate was hired as an Art Director immediately after graduating from OTC!



this rough layout be slavishly adhered to. As the graphic artist sets up photos based on the layout, one should freely improvise as new, perhaps-better ideas for various panels occur.

The next step, taking the photographs, also requires planning and preparation. Using the script and layout as guides, the graphic artist should gather props, scout locations, contact models (if necessary) and consider what, if any, lighting equipment and special lenses are needed for the photo session(s). Depending on time, budget and needs, these photo sessions can be very quick and simple or extremely elaborate. In the case of *Adventures in Graphic Design Technology*, faculty members convinced their children to pose and procured backgrounds from several royalty-free stock photo websites, and used a few personal photographs.

Once the images are ready, they need to be placed as comic book panels in a page layout program. Many professional comic book designers use Adobe Indesign, Illustrator, Photoshop or Manga Studio, but there are other, less robust (and less expensive) programs such as Microsoft Word, Apple Pages, and a number of design apps that can also get the job done. Conventionally, comic panels are surrounded by a black line border, but one can opt to simply let the spaces between panels — which also have no standard, set size, but should be consistent — divide the images.

At this point in the process, the project should start resembling an actual, bona fide comic book, but the next step will absolutely transform the pages. Although lettering is arguably the defining characteristic separating comic from illustrated text, lettering often receives the least attention, with less importance placed on how professional that aspect of the work looks. No matter how impressive the imagery, a poorly lettered comic will always look... well, amateurish.

Comic book lettering is easier to accomplish in one of the Adobe suite programs or Manga Studio, but it can be done in software such as Microsoft Word. Word might limit a designer to dialogue balloons that are rectangles rather than modified ovals, and balloon tails with straight lines instead of tradi-

tional tapered shapes, but letters contained in such configurations have been used in books since the earliest days of comics. Finding good comic book fonts, designed by true typographers, is quite easy, and many can be downloaded for free. But as always, be certain to read the fine-print legalese before using any font from the internet.

When the lettering is finished, as with any written material, an editor should be hired to examine the pages, and the files should be saved in an appropriate manner and format. Many printers prefer PDF files for printing, but be sure their particular criteria are met. There are a myriad of ways the comic can be accessed online, from individual pages published as images to high-resolution files that can be downloaded as a multi-page document or ebook.

An Avenue for Advertising

Ironically, the promotional comic book must itself be promoted. As is always the case in advertising, “if you build it, they will [not automatically] come.” The OTC graphic design technology program used the program showcase to unveil their comic book, but didn’t stop there: In addition to keeping copies on hand as a quick reference, the faculty also takes copies with them where they go — especially for any promotional or recruiting event. Any and every opportunity to place the comic in the hands of a potential student must be pursued.

Can using comics as an avenue for advertising increase student numbers? Without a wider promotional campaign that includes all the disparate factors that contribute to the positive branding of one’s school, department, and program... probably not. Effective advertising efforts require attention to the big picture as well as the details. However, there’s no denying that comics



have been successfully incorporated into many promotional campaigns through the decades, and their power to engage the public is still potent. Watching high school students, for example — after sifting through table after table of standardized brochures, magazines, booklets and posters — lift OTC’s graphic design technology comic, smile and proclaim it “cool,” is a win in and of itself. When they ask, unsolicited, if they can take the comic home, OTC faculty know they’ve done something right.

Depending on a department’s available budget, faculty may decide to circumvent the do-it-yourself methodology outlined above and contact comic book professionals to produce their promotional item, which, at the end of the proverbial day, would be ideal. It is almost always better to seek the aid of seasoned professionals for any given endeavor. However, producing a comic in-house is not impossible; with a little research and careful planning, a comic book can be incorporated as part of any career and technical education program’s promotional efforts. The allure of the comic book format is strong — some might even say “heroic.” ■

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