

A Rare Bridge

The Comic Book Project Connects Learning with Life

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TARIQUE SPOKE ONLY ONCE in the five times that I visited his school in Brooklyn. I assumed this fifth-grader was either new to the English language or had a speech impediment. His teacher informed me otherwise. He could speak well, but he chose not to. Often withdrawn and unfocused, Tarique suddenly jolted to attention with the task I had presented to his class: create a comic book. While I was busy explaining the details of the process, Tarique was a flurry of paper and pencils. He was already on page three by the time his classmates began to brainstorm ideas. His comic book was about an alien-robot who rescued children from dangerous situations. The robot used telekinetic powers to warn unsuspecting children when something terrible was about to happen, such as a falling building, a runaway car, even a giant rat. The result was simply stunning, full of detailed visual design and powerful text. Flipping through the pages, I said how impressed I was with his creative approach, and to my surprise Tarique responded—the one time he spoke to me. He said, “I’m a creative kind of guy.”

Tarique and his classmates were participants in The Comic Book Project (CBP), which I launched in 2001 with the straightforward goal of engaging young people in planning, writing, designing, and eventually publishing original comic books. The idea behind CBP was to establish a fun and socially relevant project through which children could create—not just receive—exciting texts and narratives as a pathway to literacy and social development. Why comic books? The reason goes beyond the fact that they are extremely popular. Comic books represent a rare bridge to the canon of reading skills



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that children are expected to master in school. A comic book is a *book*. We “read” a comic book rather than play (videogame), view (website), or watch (video). And when children have the opportunity to create their own comic books in partnership with

their classmates, the equally important skills of writing, speaking, and listening are introduced and reinforced.

From our first class, at a middle school around the corner from my apartment in Queens, the project has grown to involve over fifty thousand children from across the U.S. and abroad. The rapid—and unexpected—growth of the project is more a testament to the power of creativity than to my ability to write a grant proposal. Educators and children took the reins of the project early on, harnessing it for their own purposes. In my role as founder, I became a learner—a conduit for ideas and information. In the process I have met determined teachers and remarkable children who, in the wake of debilitating budget cuts and stifling standardized tests, have still found a creative voice in the learning process. I am consistently awed by such people.

For me the works that the children create in CBP have always been a means to the end of creative thinking, personal expression, literacy development, and community-building. When I see the spark in a child's eye as he expounds on the gears on his superhero's magical helmet, I glimpse the gears of his own mind working, pushing forward to communicate thoughts and explore identities. Had he the opportunity to engage with words and language in this manner throughout his school experience, I doubt he would read two grades below his level. CBP gives children like this an opportunity to reconnect with learning—to understand and embrace the power of communication through words, art, storytelling, and publishing.



A drawing from the first Comic Book Project at a Queens, New York, middle school.



From a sixth-grade boy with the Comic Book Project in Brooklyn, New York. "After doing drugs, the main character gets high—literally and figuratively."

Getting Started

Looking back at that first CBP class of twenty-four fifth- and sixth-graders, I see now that I had no idea what I was doing. I remember saying to the children, "OK, we're going to make some comic books, so... um..." But just as I have seen transpire in hundreds of classrooms since then, the children took charge.

One said, "We need characters, like a good guy and a bad guy."

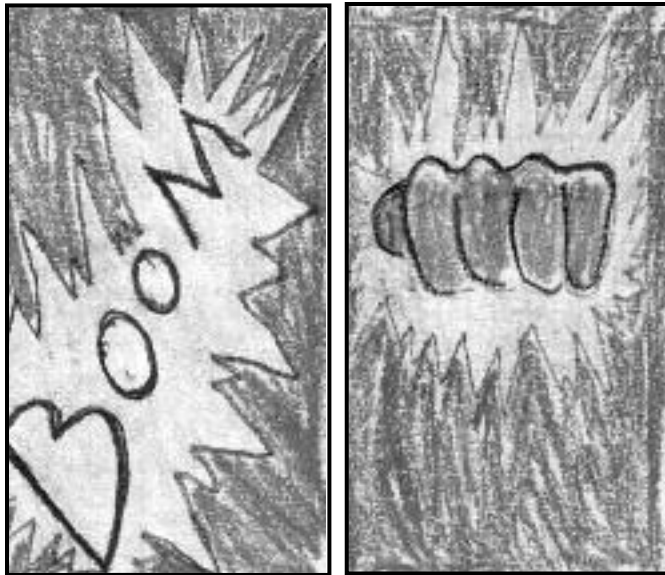
Another said, "It needs a cool story. Let's make it scary!"

A girl in the back said shyly, "But there has to be a lot of good art, and I can't draw."

A boy's eyes lit up as he shouted, "Hey, let's print our comic books and make a million dollars!"

Those four elements—characters, plot, design, and publishing—have been the backbone of CBP ever since. These students solved the problem of the reluctant artist by forming teams, each with a writer, artist, editor, and inker. In doing so the self-described writers were able to draft a manuscript, the artists designed foregrounds and backgrounds, the editors proofed the writing and artistic content, and the inkers employed thin black markers to outline all of the important words and pictures. By the end of the process, which took ten classes, the children had created sequential visual narratives—that is, comic books—full of action and drama.

Despite this early success, CBP might have ended then and there had it not been for the persistence of educators in the robust network of after-school programs in New York City. These school-based sites are administered by nonprofit community organizations, some citywide like the YMCA and others local organizations such as the Washington Heights-Inwood Coalition. What unites these programs is their thirst for curricula to help overcome the inherent paradox of after-school education: children are required to learn but not required to attend. To keep kids coming back, these programs need offerings, like those of CBP, that will attract and hold their interest. Through the support of organizations such as The After-School Corporation and The Children's Aid Society, CBP became a vehicle for thirty-three after-school programs throughout the city to establish comic book clubs. In the 2002–2003 school year, over seven hundred children in grades four through eight met once or twice a week to write and design origi-



From a sixth-grade boy with the Comic Book Project in Brooklyn. "The author uses words and pictures to demonstrate a fight that the character has in jail."

nal comics. The theme was rather open-ended: create comic books that represent your lives. Some of the driving questions were: What do you want to say about yourself, your neighborhood, your culture, your background? How will your story reflect who you are? What do you want your friends, families, teachers, and community members to learn from your comic book?

The student comics that resulted from that year established an unexpected social mission for CBP. As I reported in *Art Education* (2004), the child authors were usually the main characters, but they rarely acted as heroes. They were often at the mercy of uncontrollable circumstances, such as a random gunshot or a hit-and-run accident. At the end of the stories, the authors remained alive, but many of their friends and relatives (real or fictionalized) had either died or been put in jail for life sentences. Some of the comic books had a moral, such as "don't do drugs," but just as many were tales of futility in which the main characters were doomed despite bold efforts to overcome struggles.

One example is by a sixth-grade boy from Brooklyn; after doing drugs, the main character in his comic gets high—literally and figuratively. The drugs start to have a negative effect, and the character suddenly cannot recall who or where he is. After a struggle with the authorities, he is incarcerated. Without showing the actual violence, the author uses words and pictures to demonstrate a fight that the character has in jail. As the character starts to become sober, he questions his decisions in life related to drug abuse and violent crime, and it looks as though he is going to turn his life around. However, the character is suddenly shot and killed by another inmate.

This kind of content may be disturbing, and it may be the very thing that turns so many educators from student-driven projects. Yet I am not the only one who believes that opportunities for personal expression and identity exploration—however difficult they may be—are crucial to authentic learning experiences. John Dewey, the forefather of progressive education, said in 1897: "The only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself." Unfortunately, our social situations are rife with injustice, inequity, and violence. We like to think of schools as the "great equalizer" (Cremin, *The American Common School*), but the pervasive disconnect between learning and life does not help children engage or invest in education. In response, CBP began to focus on important themes to help children reflect on difficult problems in their lives and in their neighborhoods; past themes have included leadership, community, tolerance, conflict resolution, and bullying.

Moving Ahead

After CBP spread throughout the after-school community in New York City, two things became clear to me. First, the process and outcomes of the project could be a viable way to build not only students' literacy and creative-thinking skills, but their social skills as well. The second thing that became clear is that I needed help. That support came from two disparate sources: Teachers College-Columbia University, which began to act as a fiscal sponsor; and Dark Horse Comics, which agreed to print, store, and distribute the student publications at cost. With the infrastructure in place, CBP expanded in 2003–2004 to Cleveland, Ohio, where a grant from the Cleveland Foundation supported the development of an in-school comic book program in which English teachers partnered with art teachers in fifty-two public elementary and middle schools. Students drafted their stories in English class; they designed the comic books in art class. The teachers chose "conflict resolution" as a citywide theme in response to growing violence in the Cleveland schools.

It was extraordinary to witness CBP blossom during the school day. English teachers used the comic book manuscripts that children were creating in order to reinforce spelling, grammar, punctuation, and writing mechanics. Art teachers used the comic books themselves to discuss perspective, drawing techniques, and color. And all the students were thinking about conflict resolution—what it means to solve a problem peacefully and the consequences of not doing so.

The Cleveland project resulted in some incredible comic books, like "Mastermind" by Angel, an eighth-grader. It is a story about a boy whose conscience comes to life and helps him make the right decisions. The conscience hovers above, encouraging the characters in the comic book to consider the consequences of violence. Unfortunately, none of them listen. One character is imprisoned. Another dies a violent death. The "mastermind" warns that everyone must make a difference. CBP did make a difference for many children in Cleveland that year and all the years that the project has flourished there since.

Having established the after-school model in New York City and the in-school model in Cleveland, CBP began to bring these models to new locations across the country, including cities such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, Hartford, Chicago, St. Louis, and



From "Mastermind," "the story of a boy whose conscience comes to life," by Angel, an eighth-grader with the Comic Book Project in Cleveland.



A collage from the Comic Book Project with The Owl and the Panther, an organization that supports refugee children and their families in Tucson, Arizona.

Washington, DC. In each urban area a local nonprofit organization acted as technical partner, such as Philadelphia Safe and Sound or the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation. These crucial partners located sites, established training workshops, helped to distribute materials, and collected comic books at the end of the process. Soon there were regional and statewide projects launched in New Jersey, New York, Arizona, and Hawaii. By 2006, there were participating schools in every state, some in very rural areas, some reaching migrants, some helping deaf children, others working with incarcerated youth, and still others with autistic children. In every one of these places, educators searching for a way to engage their students found that the CBP model provided a compelling, relevant, and authentic educational experience that was about process just as much as results.

With all the thousands of children participating in CBP, there are far too many stories to tell here. But one experience does stand out to me. The Owl and Panther (www.owlandpanther.org) is an organization in Tucson, Arizona, that supports refugee children and their families. Sponsored by the Hopi Foundation, the Owl and Panther provides education and resources for some of Tucson's most vulnerable children who fled their countries to escape violence and persecution. In 2006, the Owl and Panther participated in CBP during a citywide Tucson implementation funded by the Robert Bowne Foundation and the National AfterSchool Association. Like the other children in Tucson, the children from the Owl and Panther planned their characters, drafted storylines, and designed comic books full of color, plot twists, and superheroes.

Yet the Owl and Panther also did something entirely different. They scanned photographs from their home countries, and then altered the color prints with sandpaper, small screwdrivers, glue sticks, and markers. The characters in the comic book are refugees who are guided throughout the story by a patient owl and a resolute panther through the most difficult situations imaginable: camps, prisons, deserts. Finally the refugees find a safe haven in Tucson. The comic book ends with powerful words: "The spirit of the owl and panther inspired these children to be brave and creative. By telling their stories, the children help others to find their own healing powers . . . and their work continues. In Tucson, Arizona, the refugees write themselves out of their darkness."

Looking Forward

One of the most rewarding aspects of running CBP has been seeing how the program has spread with very little effort on my part because of the great demand for what it provides. In Hawaii, for example, I launched CBP as a pilot in 2006 with a small grant from the Hawaii Department of Education.

Now educators across Hawaii implement CBP entirely on their own, scheduling the clubs, overseeing the materials, scanning the finished comics, and printing their own publications. The same thing has happened in San Francisco. One nonprofit family support center in the Portola neighborhood expanded CBP citywide with the help of a local museum. They check in once a year or so to tell me how great the project has been for them and their children. As a curriculum developer and youth advocate, I could not be more satisfied. I have tried to foster this type of replicability, which has allowed the program to flourish across the United States and now internationally.


The self-sustaining nature of CBP has given me some time and space now to look ahead. In partnership with a friend and colleague at the City University of New York, I recently launched another initiative called the Youth Music Exchange. The goal of this project is to establish school-based record labels. Children write and record their music, write marketing plans, write press releases, write business plans, write content for their CD inserts, write a proposal for a launch party, write, write, write.

In every way this work going forward is informed by CBP. Within the framework of a simple curricular structure, children are thinking critically and creatively about language and communication. They are sharing their work with each other and their communities. They are pursuing the powerful intrinsic motivator of self-expression and the authentic extrinsic motivator of producing and publishing a tangible product. While doing so they are meeting every state standard in English language arts from reading and writing for information and understanding to listening and speaking for social

Seeing what has been possible with the Comic Book Project, if I were asked whether we can close the achievement gap, engage children in learning, and increase their knowledge in the content areas, my answer would be a resounding “yes.”



A collage from the Comic Book Project with The Owl and the Panther.

interaction. Seeing what has been possible with the Comic Book Project, if I were asked whether we can close the achievement gap, engage children in learning, and increase their knowledge in the content areas, my answer would be a resounding “yes.” But none of that will happen if we teach as so many of us were taught, with an ever-widening chasm between learning and life. Comic books can be a bridge across the rift, but only if creative thinkers are turning those pages. 

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