

Chapter 3

Type Five and Beyond: Tools to Teach Manga in the College Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Great is the need now for structure in comics-studies pedagogy, especially for Japanese manga, given the growth of comics-studies and pop-culture programs at North American colleges. Although teaching manga can be supported using any number of English-based texts, instructors will want to explore target-culture resources, such as those by Natsume, Yomota, and other Japanologists. Texts specific to Japan can improve student comprehension and interpretation of manga. The author describes methods of teaching manga using comparative analysis resources from their Japanese culture classroom. Based on experiences there, they show the use the ideas of Japanese scholars for formal analysis in order to enhance discussions of the manga page, including topics of panels, onomatopoeia, and genre conventions. American comics heavily stress sequentiality, but manga use pages, panels, and words differently to emphasize mood. By preparing for the manga classroom differently, we can offer our students tools specific to expand discussions of Japanese culture.

With the ubiquity and growth of Comics Studies classes and even programs at colleges and universities in North America, there is a great need for structure in comics-studies pedagogy. When it comes to courses on non-American comics, such as Japanese *manga*, there is even a greater need. Japanese manga are not only a different kind of comics, they embody a different culture. It is important to be aware of the cultural conventions of manga when teaching it, and, to understand the conventions of Japanese culture, too. If possible, we should also try to use the lens of the target culture—the work of Japanese manga scholars—to supplement our teaching of these works. Manga is one of Japan’s most successful cultural products in terms of both domestic consumption and international exports, so it has a long and rich development often with very specific kinds of sub-genres and artistic conventions that are part of those

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sub-genres. Although the great popularity of manga both in Japan and abroad can attest to the fact that anyone can read manga, when one teaches manga in the classroom, it is important to be aware not only of cultural differences but also genre conventions specific to that manga type: manga is a world with its own rich and various ecosystems. This essay will offer suggestions and tools to help the educator in the higher-ed classroom use those texts and also provide help in how to analyze them for one's own research.

According to Nick Sousanis' website *Spin Weave and Cut* (2022), there are nearly thirty undergraduate college programs in North America where one can either learn about comics or comics are used to teach culture or cultural history. At Portland State University, for example, we have a Comics Studies certificate program that undergraduate or graduate students can complete by taking six comics classes. Started in 2015 by Dr. Susan Kirtley, it has grown into a very popular program on the PSU campus, with classes easily filling up to maximum enrollments (usually thirty per course). Students at PSU not only learn about comics and the cultures that originated them, but they also can learn how to make comics and these skill-building courses often lead to careers or career opportunities in comics. Portland, for example, is home to a number of comics publishers—Dark Horse Comics, Image Comics, and Oni Press, just to name a few—so students will often use their Comics Studies certificate as a ticket into internships and later employment in the field. Very recently, program students under the direction of Dr. Kacy McKinney have used their comics-making skills to write about Portland's homeless crisis and work in tandem with the advocacy group Street Roots to produce supplemental comics about being houseless either from the first-person point of view or through journalistic coverage (DelGaudio, 2022). In other words, comics in the classroom can obviously change student lives, leading to personal development, career opportunities, and even help fuel social justice. We have advanced far from the days of reading *Spider-Man* and *Batman*. The real superheroes are students who have used comics to help empower themselves.

As a teacher of Japanese at PSU, Japanese comics are indispensable in my work to help enhance understanding of Japanese culture for our Japanese majors and minors. In my classrooms, I set a number of goals for the development of intercultural competence: to empower students so they can feel comfortable about living in Japan, to confidently make Japanese friends, and to try understand Japanese culture on its own terms. PSU is one of the few universities in the United States that can boast of a very robust Japanese language-program, offering its students a full menu of areas of Japanese language and culture to explore: a full survey of Japanese literature from its origins to contemporary works; participation in Japanese-language and English-language versions of kabuki and other dramatic productions; Japanese linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pedagogy; advanced readings of literary works in the target language; classical language study; business Japanese; graduate seminars for our M.A. students in Japanese; and then, there is manga. Currently, I teach a rotating group of five manga classes that feature different content depending upon either historical phases or comparative foci. In order to make manga into viable texts where students can appreciate both the artistic achievements and the cultural background, it is necessary to employ analytic tools to help students slow down and be able to see cultural elements in play. Some of these analytical tools will be familiar to readers of this essay, but they will be used in unexpected ways; other ways may be new, but they may prove to be just as useful.

Although teaching manga can be done using any number of English-language texts, even Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), instructors should consider using resources from the target culture when available. Natsume Fusanosuke, a near contemporary of McCloud, exclaimed "We are not alone!" (à la *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*) when he and his editing partner in late 1994 discovered the American's seminal text (Natsume 2000, 227); but, at that time, they had already completed their own equally seminal comics-analysis text, *How to Read Manga (Manga no yomikata)*, (1995). These days,

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