

comic books: an effective teaching tool

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Will EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) homemakers actually read educational comic books? If so, can they learn from them? A research project completed recently with EFNEP homemakers in North Carolina provides evidence that they will and they can!

Since 1914, Extension workers have sought new ways to reach the public with educational information. One innovation that's growing in popularity is the comic book. Millions of dollars have been spent on this medium by private and public agencies and institutions in the past 10 years. Unfortunately, little effort has been made to evaluate the effectiveness of the medium in bringing about changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the intended audiences.

Comics in Teaching

Although it's generally assumed that only "kids" read comics, survey results show that comic readership is highest for those between the ages of 30 and 39.¹

In a study conducted over a 12-year period (1939-1950), 50,000 adults were interviewed about what they read in the newspapers. The category that ranked highest was "the comics." The next highest category was "war." Since this study was conducted during World War II, it's significant to note that readership of war news was about one-half the readership of the comics.²

Comic Readership

Comics have been used effectively with children in the classroom for decades. In recent years, millions of dollars have been invested in comic books aimed at adult audiences. The comic strip format has been used by the armed forces

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to present instructional materials since 1940. Animated cartoons are used for teaching subjects like preventive medicine and weapons' functioning. A digest-sized booklet called *P.S. (The Preventive Service Magazine)* has a monthly distribution of 110,000 copies.

The Soil Conservation Society of America has published two comic booklets focused on improving the environment. The booklets are designed for children, but provide fascinating reading for adults as well.

In 1975, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published two *Farm Workers' Pesticide Safety* cartoon books, one in English and one in Spanish.

As early as 1961, the Public Health Service was publishing a comic book on poison control. This booklet featured Dennis the Menace and was entitled *Dennis the Menace Takes a Poke at Poison*. It was distributed by the Federal Extension Service in 1968.

Labor got into the comic book act in the late 1960s. The Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen published two booklets dealing with the intricate workings of the union.

In 1967, the United States Department of Agriculture made available to newspapers a series of cartoons related to soil fertility. The cartoons were designed for use as "filler features" during the crop growing season.

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The University of Wisconsin-Extension developed and released to newspapers a series of cartoons on food preservation and safety in 1974. The cartoons were used in 28 daily and 22 weekly newspapers, representing a circulation of 975,000 people in the first year.

Some effort has been made to evaluate the effectiveness of comics in teaching, particularly with children. For example, Arnold Rose determined that the attitudes of high school students in Minnesota toward mental illness could be changed significantly through the use of a cartoon strip.³

A study for the Extension Service/USDA showed that knowledge of nutrition concepts increased significantly among disadvantaged youth when nutrition lessons were supplemented with comic books.⁴

Comics and cartoons have had an important impact on politics, the spoken language, human rights, and humor in this country. If comics can produce this effect on our society accidentally, what could they do if applied purposefully?

Comics and the Disadvantaged

Logically, it seems that people from the lower end of the educational and economic scale would prefer to receive information through pictures and simple stories. However, research shows that the educationally and economically disadvantaged aren't avid readers of comics.⁵ The highest readership is among college graduates.

There's research evidence that among the lower educational and economic segments of society, there's a certain stigma attached to being "caught" reading comics. The phenomenon has been described as a "defense mechanism"—"comics are for kids," "comics are trash," "reading comics gives the impression to others that one is incapable of reading more complicated materials."⁶

Based on this research, we concluded that many of the efforts, to date, to reach the disadvantaged adult with educational information through comics have been futile. We were convinced, however, that the comic book could be an effective educational tool with EFNEP homemakers if they could be motivated to read it.

Our Research

We found that 95% of the EFNEP homemakers in North Carolina had one or more working television sets in the home and the type of program most frequently watched was the "daytime serial."⁷ We felt that if the characters portrayed on one of the popular serials could be transferred to a comic book, the homemaker would be more likely to read it.

Written permission was obtained from the TV network, sponsor, producer, and cast of "The Edge of Night" to use that show's format and characters in the project.

Six basic concepts on foods and nutrition were identified by Extension foods and nutrition specialists at the North Carolina State University as the subject matter to be taught. A set of six comic books was developed. The set consisted of a continuing emotion-packed story, beginning with the first book and ending with the sixth. One of the foods and nutrition concepts was integrated into the story in each book. The artwork and story were done by a New York cartoonist.

The comic books were sent (one each week for a period of six weeks) to a random sample of EFNEP homemakers. A pre- and post-test of knowledge and practices were given



The series of comic books taught foods and nutrition.

through personal interviews by EFNEP aides. The results of the study showed that 94% of the homemakers who received the comic books read them and gained in both knowledge and practices related to the 6 concepts.

Attitudes toward the comic book as an educational medium were generally positive. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being very positive and 10 being very negative) the mean score for the sample was 3.69. There were some negative comments, especially from those who said they didn't read the comic books. Homemakers who had a positive attitude toward the EFNEP program, and those who admitted they read comic books, viewed the comic book positively. Those who preferred daytime serials, read funny papers, and blacks expressed slightly more positive attitudes toward the comic books than comparison groups.

Conclusions

The study showed that comic books can be used effectively in reaching EFNEP homemakers with educational information. We can expect the homemakers to have positive attitudes toward them if they're well-done and are in good taste.

However, caution should be exercised in the indiscriminate use of comics in teaching the disadvantaged adult. We question



Wise shopping is the subject of one comic book.

whether EFNEP homemakers will actually read abstract comic books. Comic books without characters and format the homemakers can identify with may inhibit learning and change—particularly if they appear childish or immature.

A nationwide study in 1962 revealed that 75% of the adult respondents expressed feelings of shame, guilt, or fear if they openly admitted reading comics. Fifty-four percent of the respondents were from the lower end of the economic scale.⁸

Summary

It's evident from survey data (including the study report here) that the "means" or "channels" to reach the disadvantaged with educational information are currently limited. They receive few newspapers, belong to few organizations, attend few educational meetings, read little, generally have a lower level of literacy, and have little interest in educational television. The only commonly used communications medium is commercial television.

It's impractical, however, to expect producers and sponsors of commercial television shows to concern themselves with transmitting educational information. *But, if the characters portrayed on commercial television (characters adults can identify with) can be used in other media, Extension may be able to reach the "unreachable" with needed educational information.*

The one-to-one approach initiated by Extension through EFNEP has made an impact on the foods and nutrition practices of thousands of homemakers. However, it's impractical to assume that everyone who needs foods and nutrition information can be reached this way. Different approaches, such as the comic book, must be developed and tested.

Footnotes

1. David M. White and Robert H. Abel, eds., *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
3. Arnold M. Rose, "Mental Health Attitudes of Youth as Influenced by a Comic Strip," *Journalism Quarterly*, XXXVI (Summer, 1958), 333-42.
4. Sydelle Stone Shapiro *et al.*, "An Evaluation of the Mulligan Stew 4-H Television Series, Volume I, Executive Summary" (Washington, D.C.: Extension Service/USDA, 4-H Youth Development Division, 1974), p. 18.
5. White and Abel, *The Funnies*.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
7. Curtis Trent and Rachel Kinlaw, "The Effectiveness of Three Media in Disseminating Basic Information to Low Income Families" (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station and the North Carolina Agricultural Extension Service, 1976).
8. White and Abel, *The Funnies*.