

Interview with Michael Bitz of The Comic Book Project

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Conducted by phone by Christian Hill

CHRISTIAN HILL:

What is the story behind The Comic Book Project?

MICHAEL BITZ:

I was working on a research project at Teachers College, which is the School of Education at Columbia University. The project was called Learning In and Through The Arts. We were aiming to identify all the ways that the arts impact kids socially and academically. We came up, as somebody in the arts would expect, with all these incredible ways that the arts could help kids build social and academic pathways that typically don't occur during the school day... And it included all the arts: music, dance, theater, etc. And so having done that research for about three years, I was ready for all these changes to happen the way that teachers teach and kids learn. But typical of academic work, it was published in a journal, and about 18 people read it, and that was sort of the end of that! So The Comic Book Project really started out of a desire to use that research, to make something tangible that teachers and students could really use to design something that was both fun and interesting for kids, but that was also socially relevant by trying to give kids a voice by generating their own comic books and then publishing and distributing them throughout the communities that we would be working in. It primarily started as an urban initiative. That is my background - urban education. It has been something that has met the needs in particular of the after-school community by offering a real chance for kids to be creative, to have a voice, and to have fun doing their comics.

CH:

What year did you begin The Comic Book Project?

MB:

The project officially launched in 2001. That was very much a year of evolution. We were really just trying to figure out what we were doing, trying to learn from kids what they would get out of a project like this, what teachers would get out of it, what their needs were. Based on that learning experience, we had a pilot in 2002 in New York City with 33 after-school programs and about 700 kids. From there, the project really evolved into what it is today, which is really about kids having a chance to share their work with each other, publish it, and build a community of kids creating comic books all across the country.

CH:

Did you find that kids were reading a lot of comics when you started The Comic Book Project?

MB:

I'd say, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that kids were certainly aware of comic books from the popular movies that have been coming out, such as the Spiderman series and so on. In terms of reading, I see urban kids really having adopted the manga, carrying some of those in their back pockets. I would say the majority of kids we work with in The Comic Book Project are not comic book readers, and have never considered themselves as artists or writers of any type. But I think that just the opportunity to create in any mode, but particularly with a story through the comic book format, has really enabled a lot of kids learn about comic books and about themselves as well.

CH:

What was one of the biggest challenges you faced in developing The Comic Book Project?

MB:

The largest challenge that we've had may be not unique to comic books. We've tried to target many children, not just children who think of themselves as artists or who have been identified as artistically "talented" - I think there is a problem with that word. We tried to get all kinds of kids involved in The Comic Book Project. By the time kids get to 3rd grade, they are usually identified as having artistic skill, ability, or "talent," and for those who aren't, they are very self-conscious about making art. So we really had to coax a lot of kids that they are artists, that they can creatively tell a story. Once they realize the power of creativity - not necessarily how well you can draw the figure or how great your art skills are - they overcome that hurdle. But I think that at the outset, when the kids hear, "you're going to make art, you're going to create a comic book," the first reaction of a lot of kids is "I can't do that!" Once they realize that they can and that everybody has some artist in them, then they really do overcome that initial challenge. That's been something we've been wrestling all along.

CH:

Have you found that teachers were hesitant to take on a comic book project?

MB:

No. For the most part, we found that teachers have been very much open to the idea. I think teachers are looking for innovative ways to engage their kids in the learning process - ways that are flexible enough, ways that start with what the

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kids have to say and with what their interests are. I think it can meet the needs of most teachers *and* students. It has been an entirely voluntary project, where teachers have decided whether they wanted to participate. Those that are not into it are certainly able to opt out. I mentioned that with the after-school community it has really been a great experience for the teachers because they face an interesting paradox. Kids are supposed to be learning, but they are not required to show up. So teachers have had to find some interesting ways to engage kids after school. And I think it is starting to seep into the school day, particularly in our school-day model in Cleveland, where art teachers are working with English teachers to partner with writing the comic book story, developing the characters, while in the art classes they work on creating the comic book, the sequencing, the perspective, and everything that goes into it. So that's really been our exciting school-day model. And there have been many different applications of the Comic Book Project for as many different cities that are involved. And that has been interesting to see as well. One of the reasons for our success has really been because of the partnerships that we've formed with community organizations around the country.

CH:

How has your role evolved throughout?

MB:

My role, you know, it's interesting. The Comic Book Project has really expanded into something beyond my wildest dreams. I have very much become a bystander, as schools and after-school programs have adapted the project to their needs. I have been fascinated to watch what they will do with it. One model in Chicago is to have high school students mentor elementary school students in creating their comic books, which I think is amazing. The Comic Book Project was very much a paper and pencil project because of cost and because you want the kids to just start making art right away, but here in New York City, there have been a number of programs that have added technological components, by scanning their work into Photoshop, by colorizing it digitally. That also is extraordinary. So I have learned a lot from the various schools that I have been in and from the various models that have been going around. One of the things that I have been trying to do is to share those different models with other people so that they can get an idea such as "that could work for me, or maybe I'll try this and adapt it this way." I think that has been one of the assets of the project to see that, to let it evolve. I am very happy and willing to do that.

CH:

Is this a full-time endeavor for you?

MB:

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It is. This is what I do. I do The Comic Book Project full-time. My official title is Senior Research Associate. The project is run out of the Teachers College where we are able to get grants and partnerships for the projects. It is entirely a non-profit endeavor in the sense we are funded exclusively by grants. The materials are distributed through Dark Horse Comics. Basically, anything we generate from that, we put it back in the school.

CH: What would you say is one of the greatest successes you have witnessed through the history of The Comic Book Project?

MB: For as much as the project has expanded and made its way into many, many places, I think it's really the individual student experiences you always look back on to cite its success. I can think of many stories I've heard from teachers along the way. One high school sophomore that I met recently was very much at risk - she had been cutting and was really not heading in the right way. She had been recruited for a teacher's Comic Book Project in her school because she had been seen doodling constantly in the back of her classroom. She really was an artist actually. Having engaged in the process of telling her story, which she could do, she really turned around and found a purpose for herself in high school. I think stories like that are what I would really attribute as the major successes of the project. It's been an opportunity for kids of all kinds - kids who are new to the English language, new to the country, or new to the city. They really have been able to tell their stories in a different way than they may not do in an English class in paragraph form, or even by talking to a peer or a teacher. I think that, with comics, their ability is personalized. The medium is something they have really adopted. It's something they enjoy.

CH: What recommendations would you give to teachers to carry on The Comic Book Project?

MB: I think there are three key elements. The first one would be to start kids off just by being creative, not necessarily having a competition for how well a character can be drawn. I would start with some very simple shapes, and see how kids can be creative and turn these simple shapes into something exciting. If it starts from that point, then everybody will be on the same page, because the creativity will be the primary demonstrator of how much you have to say. The second element would be to encourage a planning and a writing process. The Comic Book Project is in part a literacy initiative. So you want kids to be writing as much as possible. To me, rather than just think, "okay, I have an idea, so now I'm going to draw my comics," the step-by-step, panel-by-panel, page-by-page process is very much an intensive writing experience. However, it's an

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important one because it will reinforce literacy skills and because kids will realize that in the real world you don't just jump into something and make it. You plan it, you create it, you edit it, and revise it. And last, the third element consists in encouraging kids to tell their story, to use their voice. We always provide kids with a theme because it grounds them. This past year, the theme was "leadership," and this coming year, the theme is "community." Within that theme, you should encourage kids to tell their side of the story. As logical as it may sound, I don't think it happens very often during the school day. Usually, you get a paragraph, you get a story, or something that happened in history. You have to memorize it and regurgitate it. So it is not often that kids do get that chance to tell their story. That's the advice I give to teachers, that's what we try to achieve with The Comic Book Project.

One thing that I should say about The Comic Book Project is that we don't really emphasize the art skills. If teachers have that, they bring it to the table and they use it with kids. Our focus has been more so on the story as the message, and obviously also on the art of writing, but typically, our school teachers, after-school volunteers, recent college graduates have art skills in their back pocket. We also try to get teachers, who have not thought of the arts in their classroom, to embrace them and to use them as a way to challenge their kids.

CH: To conclude, what are the latest comics that you have read and enjoyed?

MB: I've recently been turned on through Dark Horse to Eric Drooker's work – I guess you wouldn't call them comic books, but they certainly are sequential narratives – like *Flood* and *Blood Song*. I've really enjoyed them – and probably because they both have a New York experience to them, which is my place. Aside from that, I have been catching up on all my Frank Miller, and I enjoyed the entire *Sin City* experience. I've gotten back into it after seeing the movie and saying, "you know, I really ought to check that out!" So that's where I have been spending some of my comic book time.

CH: Thanks so much.

Note: Information about The Comic Book Project is online at:
<http://www.comicbookproject.org/>