



Resignifying Comics for Multimodal Literary Learning: Lynda Barry's Pedagogy as Inspiration

Redéfinissant la bande dessinée pour l'apprentissage littéraire multimodal: la pédagogie de Lynda Barry comme inspiration

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Abstract

This article examines the role of comics within the field of literary education. It pays particular attention to the capacity of comics to build literary competence by cultivating interpretive and storytelling skills. Traditionally marginalized in education due to perceptions of being a minor or inadequate form of reading, comics are now increasingly recognized as complex multimodal literary texts. The article first considers the pedagogical conditions that have facilitated their gradual incorporation into the literature classroom. It then explores the pedagogical potential of comic creation, drawing on the teaching practices of the artist Lynda Barry as a case study to illustrate the intersection between creativity, multimodality and literary analysis. The article argues that comics are not only effective instruments for promoting reading habits but also significant resources for reconfiguring literature pedagogy within a multimodal framework. It concludes that comics can enhance both literary analysis and literary pedagogy, going far beyond their token presence in school libraries.

Keywords: Teaching Comics; Reading Comics; Lynda Barry; Literary Education; Multimodality

Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle de la bande dessinée dans l'éducation littéraire, concrètement sur sa capacité à développer les compétences littéraires telles que les compétences d'interprétation et de narration. Traditionnellement marginalisée dans l'éducation, perçue comme une forme de lecture mineure ou inadéquate, la bande dessinée est aujourd'hui reconnue comme un texte littéraire, à la fois multimodal et complexe. Nous examinons, dans un premier temps, les conditions pédagogiques qui ont facilité son intégration progressive dans les cours de littérature. Dans un deuxième temps, nous abordons le potentiel pédagogique de la création de bandes dessinées, en nous appuyant sur les pratiques pédagogiques de l'autrice Lynda Barry, qui illustrent l'intersection entre créativité, multimodalité et analyse littéraire. Cet article montre comment la bande dessinée est non seulement un instrument efficace pour promouvoir la lecture, mais aussi une ressource intéressante pour reconfigurer la pédagogie littéraire dans un cadre multimodal. En conclusion, les bandes dessinées peuvent améliorer aussi bien l'analyse littéraire que la pédagogie littéraire, et aller bien au-delà de leur présence symbolique dans les bibliothèques scolaires.

Mots-clés: Enseignement de la Bande Dessinée; Lecture de Bandes Dessinées; Lynda Barry; Éducation Littéraire; Multimodalité



INTRODUCTION

Within comic studies, the intersection between comics and pedagogy has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Ibarra-Rius & Ballester-Roca, 2022; Kirtley et al., 2020; Pons & Ibarra-Rius, 2023). This emerging research area places teaching and learning through and with comics at the heart of inquiry (Kirtley et al., 2020), and investigates how comics are used in various learning contexts across primary, secondary, and higher education, exploring their pedagogical affordances and challenges. While it builds on a longstanding tradition of historical, textual, and cultural analysis of comics (e.g. Ahmed, 2023; García, 2010; McFadden, 1982; Mikkonen, 2017), the pedagogy of comics foregrounds didactics, teachers' knowledge, and students' learning processes in relation to literary interpretation, comic-making, and cultural knowledge. On the one hand, educational studies orientated towards linguistic and literary learning tend to focus on studying the development of reading strategies specific to reading comics and their impact on literary expression and interpretation skills. On the other hand, educational studies associated with scientific and cultural learning tend to emphasise how comics can reinforce disciplinary knowledge (i.e. science, history, philosophy).

The growing academic interest in comics as a pedagogical tool is closely linked to their gradual legitimation as literary texts (Chute, 2008; Meskin, 2009) and to their increasing importance in the publishing industry. During recent decades, the social perception of comic books has shifted from that of being a genre intended merely for trivial leisure consumption to being increasingly recognised as a complex form of multimodal narrative with distinctive linguistic, visual, and formal features. This transformation, affecting not just the social value attributed to comics but also the associated practices and identities of their readers, has inspired new pedagogical opportunities and opened new research avenues within literary education.

In this paper, we focus on the specific contributions of comics to literary education. We are interested in how comics challenge the way literature is taught in the academic context. We therefore ask: How can comics contribute to teaching literary skills? What interpretative challenges do they pose that might enrich literary education? What barriers, beliefs, or prejudices might impede the integration of comics into the pedagogy of literature? The discussion unfolds in two intertwined parts. In the first part, Cristina Aliagas traces the educational conditions that have facilitated the integration of comics into the teaching of literature, highlighting their potential to expand this to include multimodal literary repertoires. In

the second part, Maheen Ahmed explores the pedagogical thinking of the artist Lynda Barry, who visualises comic-making as a strategy for fostering creativity and critical interpretation, and reflects on its implications for the development of a multimodal literary competence in formal education.

COMICS IN LITERARY EDUCATION: BETWEEN EXCLUSION AND PARTIAL LEGITIMATION

During the 20th century, comic books were largely excluded from the educational landscape, as they were perceived to be detrimental to learning and potential catalysts for violence (Humphrey, 2020). At that time, comic books were regarded as a threat to conventional reading practices and mainstream reading education, underpinned by the belief that they were excessively engaging and intellectually simplistic. That mindset was strongly influenced by the work of the American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, a leading figure in the anti-comics movement of the 40s and 50s, who argued that comics disrupted the cognitive and perceptual mechanisms essential for developing reading skills. In his influential book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1956), Wertham claimed that the greatest harm inflicted by comic books was in the realm of reading: “Comic books harm the development of the reading process from the lowest level of the most elementary hygiene of vision to the highest level of learning to appreciate how to read a good literary book.” (p. 139). He also asserted that “comic books are death on reading” (p. 121) and argued that “the comic-book format is an invitation to illiteracy” (p. 118). It is interesting to note that later research has revealed that some of Wertham’s evidence was overstated or manipulated (Tilley, 2012). Also, he later acknowledged that not all comics were harmful for children (Tilley, 2012) and by the 1970’s he began to argue that comics could, in fact, play a beneficial role in American society (Beaty, 2005). His change of stance reflects a broader shift in the cultural perception of comics, which brought important transformations in literary education.

Contrasting this view with today’s understanding of comics as cultural texts reveals a clear shift. Although the debate about the role of comics in literary education persists, there is now broader awareness in literature studies that comics convey meaning in distinctive ways, and that it is precisely their specific formal properties, which combine textual and iconic codes, that offer unique opportunities for expanding notions of literacy, narrative, and literature. Comics, by reminding us that the medium might be part of the message, emphasise the role of image-making in literary interpretation and expand the horizons of literary learning to multimodality. Nevertheless, and despite the advances in the understanding of

comics as complex and legitimate narrative texts, these are still often regarded with suspicion by educators and remain only partially integrated into classroom practice (Griffith, 2010; Ibarra-Rius & Ballester-Roca, 2022; Lapp et al. 2019; Vilaboa, 2025). In educational settings, comics have entered schools primarily as tools for promoting reading, and regardless of their token presence in school libraries, they are not yet fully embraced as resources for teaching literary interpretation.

The idea that comics were a dangerous form of reading was deeply rooted in educators' viewpoints throughout the 20th century and accorded with the traditional model of teaching literature that prevailed until the early 21st century. This model emphasised the expert reading of a selected corpus of books in order to study the history of literature within a national framework. Within this paradigm, articulated around the concept of national classics, comic books were seen as counter-culture—what Groensteen (2006) termed “an unidentified cultural object”. Consequently, since they were not considered proper literature, due to their visual nature, they were excluded from the literary curriculum. During the 21st century, however, the traditional model of teaching literature has slowly evolved into a literary education model (Colomer, 2005) that puts reader response, contemporary reading practices, and literary socialisation at the centre of the education process. Alongside this pedagogical shift, formal literary education, which typically privileges written text, has slowly revisited its own foundations and opened up to new, contemporary, evolving literary texts and practices which are multimodal, such as visual narrative books, thereby enabling comics to enter the school context, at least as an option for leisure reading.

The first of the tenets of literary education that has been revisited concerns the role of the reader in the interpretative process, an aspect that has indirectly contributed to the legitimation of the comic book as a challenging text to interpret. The teaching/learning goal of the current literary education model in Europe (Colomer, 2005) is for students to develop literary knowledge and skills through participation in community literary activities, rather than just listening to lectures and following textbook activities. This model brings together reading, analysis, and literary writing, emphasising different forms of literary socialisation and expanding modes of textual engagement in an academic context that involves multimodality and the arts. It also integrates independent reading as part of the learning process to build the reading habit. This model is based on Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory and the idea that knowledge and interpretation are constructed through encounters between readers, books, and communities. The idea is that the reader is a meaning-maker and not a passive interpreter. These changes in the didactic mindset

regarding how we interpret literary texts have contributed to expanding the type of literary texts embraced in classrooms and school libraries, and to visualise comics as challenging texts that must be interpreted by taking into account the range of semiotic modes involved. This view subverts the old idea that reading comics is easier than reading novels or poetry, recognises the intellectual effort required to read such multimodal texts, and legitimates the integration of comics in the school.

The second tenet that has gradually, yet irreversibly, been challenged in the field of literary education concerns the notion of literature, which has expanded from a written-text perspective to encompass visual, multimodal, and artistic literacies (Aliagas et al., 2024). Acknowledging that reading is a multimodal practice has enabled academic recognition of visual texts and graphic narratives in Children's Literature Studies (Nelson et al., 2023), such as comics, picture books, silent books, and digital, interactive literature. Nowadays, literary education is more orientated towards cultural heritage and the visual literary ecology of the media, a shift that better reflects the semiotic systems used by young people in their daily lives. However, this change in conception has not led to a meaningful integration of comics into pedagogy. In teaching practice, they are still treated as an additional form of reading, a reward, or a strategic resource to promote reading, rather than a legitimate pedagogical object (Baile et al., 2023; Colomer & Fons, 2010). As Heath and Bhagat (2005) point out, regardless of their presence in schools, comics remain "the invisible art" in literature classes. This marginalisation may stem from a mistrust of the image as a valid medium for literary communication, an attitude that continues to reinforce the old ideology portraying comics as a threat to mainstream literary education. Nevertheless, as the following sections will show, recent research positions comics as a valuable resource for cultivating literary competence, particularly by bringing together interpretation, multimodality, and artistic creation as mutually reinforcing practices in the literature class. This insight has also been an underpinning claim in the way artists have begun to construct pedagogical approaches around comics (see the case of Lynda Barry in a later section of this paper).

REFRAMING COMICS AS LEGITIMATE PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS IN LITERARY EDUCATION

Comic books bring multiple benefits and opportunities for today's literary education, the most significant being their potential to combine interpretation and creation in the development of a critical literary competence, conceived as an artistic, multimodal construct.

From a reading skills perspective, comics are a relevant resource for pre-readers and novice readers. In the early stages of reading, when learners are still acquiring the rules of written language and practising phonics, the image in comics becomes a regulator of comprehension, bringing visual and contextual clues that ease the demanding process of textual decoding. At this critical moment in the development of the reader, the iconic dimension of the comic compensates for the frustration that arises from difficulties in understanding the written language. Later on, when the reader becomes fluent and proficient in comprehension, the iconic-textual hybridity of comics introduces specific reading challenges that strengthen reading competence by making the reader actively construct meaning by integrating verbal, visual, spatial, and gestural modes of understanding. As Heath and Bhagat (2005, p. 589) explain: “Interpretation of both the words and the pictures of comic books depends on gaps and fill-in, on absences and presences. Readers understand them by bringing to bear both their real-world information and creativity in image building and meaning making”. In this sense, Humphrey (2020) argues that the juxtaposition between text and image requires more interpretative control by readers who must navigate visual abstraction, fragmented narratives, and compositional elements. Furthermore, comic reading does not always follow a strictly linear path; as Wittig (2024) observes, comics often encourage readers to interpret and establish connections in flexible ways, leading to deeper engagement and multimodal thinking.

From a literary education perspective, comics expand the repertoire of interpretative skills addressed in the classroom. As Dallacqua (2012) notes, comics are rich in literary devices and thus have significant potential to foster literary interpretation grounded in multimodal awareness. Reading a comic involves analysing iconic-textual sequences while attending to narrative ellipsis, visual metaphors, panel syntax, composition, and resources for expressing movement, emotion, and temporality, among many other things. It also requires attention to the interplay between text and image, as well as the use of colour, form, and space in meaning-making. In this regard, comics are an excellent resource for teaching the imbrication between meaning and signifier in literary rhetoric. They also offer opportunities to reflect on literary discourse and to explore intertextual connections with other artistic forms, such as cinema, animation, or videogames. As Heath and Bhagat (2005, p. 590) assert:

In an era when literary texts and age-old literary themes enter new forms every year—from films to adventure games in arcades to hypertext—the visual and verbal power of comics may be one of the most powerful and productive forms of preparation and motivation available to invite new readers into literary habits.

Thus, the question is no longer whether comics should be included in literature classes, but rather which pedagogical functions they should serve and how they should be used to promote specific forms of literary learning (Vilaboa, 2025). In this regard, beyond the pedagogical use of comics as objects of interpretation in the literature class, comic-making can be a powerful pedagogical strategy that reinforces the understanding of the medium. Within literary education, comics highlight the value of literary creation as a pathway for learning the rhetorical rules of literary texts and the conventions of storytelling. Comic making as a pedagogical strategy might foster an understanding of how meaning emerges in storytelling through the articulation of textual and visual modes. By engaging in this type of creative task, students might explore both the constraints and the possibilities of multimodal expression, thereby developing a deeper awareness of literary form and narrative. Moreover, through reading and creating comics, students might gain critical tools to challenge written discourses and explore alternative modes of meaning-making in storytelling.

TEACHING COMICS THROUGH MAKING COMICS: THE INSPIRATIONAL CASE OF LYNDA BARRY

The second part of this paper focusses on American artist and author Lynda Barry (b. 1956) in order to trace the broader implications of comics and pedagogy, going beyond the tools of the craft – and labour – of comics. Her “signature pedagogy” (Hall & Thomson, 2017) on comics offers a particularly compelling inspirational example of how comic-making might become a relevant pedagogical approach in education. Her understanding is relevant for literary education studies since she envisions comic-making as an accessible, everyday mode of expression, and not as a specialized artistic skill, encouraging learners to view image-making as integral to storytelling. This perspective challenges the traditional separation of reading and writing, interpretation and creation, and instead conceptualises them as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a multimodal literary competence.

In 2019, Barry received the prestigious MacArthur Genius Grant for “inspiring creative engagement through original graphic works and a teaching practice centered on the role of image making in communication.” (MacArthur Foundation, 2019, par. 1). While scholarship on Barry has often focussed on her specific brand of life writing, or autobiographicalography, introduced in *One Hundred Demons* (2017, first published by Sasquatch Books in 2002), the rising interest of the role of comics in different forms of teaching have generated a renewed interest in Barry’s close engagement with pedagogy throughout her career. It is, therefore, not

surprising that the volume *With Great Power Comes Great Pedagogy: Teaching Learning with Comics* (edited by Susan Kirtley et al., 2020) includes two pieces by Barry's former students, Ebony Flowers and Leah Misemer, both of whom combine comics practice and comics scholarship. While Misemer interviews Barry on her extensive teaching practice and experience, Flowers adds a reflection, in comics form, on the necessity of copying in art education which she learned in Barry's classes. In contrast to academic writing, "ripping off one another," in art education, "helps people tolerate the lines they make to create a comic" (Flowers, 2020, p. 85). Similarly, most of the chapters in the critical anthology edited by Jane Tolmie, *Contagious Imagination: The Work and Art of Lynda Barry* (2022), focus on Barry's unconventional and highly effective ways of teaching comics that have far-reaching implications, prompting reflections on creativity, new approaches to trauma and even contributing to a college writing course (O'Connor, 2022; Pero, 2022; Pines, 2022; Prescott-Johnson, 2022). The anthology also includes artists' responses to Barry's teachings, confirming once again the centrality of artistic pedagogy to Barry's work, which informs many of her graphic novels and the numerous courses she has taught in diverse settings and for diverse students, ranging from the university classroom to community centres (Burgess, 2022; Villacorta, 2022).

Books by practitioners on the craft of comics are hardly a rarity. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) remains a staple introduction to comics and has been followed by *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing the Art Form* (2000) and *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (2006). As pointed out by Rachel Miller and Daniel Worden in their introduction to the special issue of *Inks: the Journal of the Comics Studies Society* on "Understanding Comics at 30," McCloud's first book "provided a roadmap for both formalist and historicist comics studies," speaking to artists, scholars and students alike (Miller & Worden, 2023, p. 232). As confirmed by Miller and Worden's special issue, *Understanding Comics* both preceded and contributed to the boom in comics scholarship and more daring experiments with the comics form itself.

Of course, McCloud's book did not emerge from a vacuum. Just as comics became established as popular reading early in the twentieth century, manuals for drawing comics also proliferated, especially for cartooning correspondence schools, which flourished in the dearth of courses on comics in professional art

schools.¹ Collected editions of such schools have recently been republished, including the W. L. Evans School of Cartooning and Caricaturing (Garvin, 2021b) and the Charles Landon Course of Cartooning from 1920s-1930s (Garvin, 2021a), both of which began posting lessons in the early 1900s (see artist and educator, Diana Korzenik's collection at the Huntington Library, *The Landon Course of Cartooning*, n.d.). These schools were named after successful comics artists and illustrators. Many renowned artists continued the tradition of publishing drawing manuals. Consider, for instance, Jack Hamm's cartooning and drawing books, Stan Lee's famous *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (Lee & Buscema, 2000, first published in 1977) or Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (2001, first published in 1985), which was a direct source of inspiration for McCloud. One of McCloud's most striking techniques is unpacking the comics form using comics (a later, notable example is Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening*, 2015). We find a similar self-conscious combination of theory and practice in Barry's comics manuals. Most comics manuals, however, rely on more conventional forms, often combining text and illustrations to clarify the different steps and premises.

Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* (2011), for instance, offers fifteen concise lessons following the temporal rhythms and modes of correspondence courses with more personal reflections on the form and vocation of comics. Like Barry's manuals, Brunetti breaks down the components of a comic to highly accessible forms. His iconic geometrical bodies with squiggly lines for limbs reappear frequently in Barry's manuals and Barry acknowledges him as both a friend and one of three key influences on her teaching in *Syllabus* (Barry, 2014, pp. 6-7). Recently, the famous Montreal-based publisher Drawn & Quarterly (also Barry's principal publisher) brought out *Q & A* (Tomine, 2024), in which the prize-winning comics author Adrian Tomine addresses a selection of readers' questions asked via Instagram. Such volumes also have a pedagogical angle since most of these questions focus on the specificities of making comics and the numerous details concerning the practicalities of a career in comics. One set of answers is directly related to the tools Tomine uses for his comics, and Tomine supplements each of his answers with full-page pictures of the tools (2024, pp. 21-29).²

¹ The Clarence Day Papers at the NYPL include correspondence from 1909. The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library holds Popeye creator, E. C. Segar's drawings for the correspondence course from 1912. See McGurk (2013).

² Comics manuals Tomine mentions being inspired by include Stan Lee and John Buscema's *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (2000) and Jack Hamm's *Drawing the Head & Figure* (1983).

In addition to such personal approaches to comics-making, which sometimes incline more towards an interview (Tomine) and sometimes more towards a manual (Brunetti), there are also more experimental explorations of the form, such as Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style* (2005), in which he adapts *oulipó* writer and journalist Raymond Queneau's famous *Exercices de style* (1946) to the comics form. Inspired by the Baroque composer, J. S. Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (ca. 1750), Queneau retells a relatively banal moment (a man about to take a metro in Paris who notices a missing button on his coat) in ninety-nine different ways. Madden transposes this exercise to the comics form by taking a banal scene from his own home life and experimenting with composition, styles, transitions, modes and genres. In contrast, Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden's *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels* (2017) turn to a *Nancy* strip by Ernie Bushmiller from 8 August 1959 to dissect the different possibilities and functioning of a recurrent gag comic.

This brief overview, which is far from exhaustive, strives to highlight the variety and scope of works exploring the making of comics and seeking to transmit the art of comics. Such transmission encompasses technical guidelines on how to draw and tell comics stories to meta-reflections on the constituents and workings of the form, supplemented with information on the practicalities of a comics career. These works, which highlight the complexity of comic book creation, become relevant guides for literature teachers who use comics to teach the rhetoric of literary texts, whether through interpretation or creation.

Barry's comics stand out from this long tradition of transmitting the tools and tricks of the trade in two distinctive ways. Firstly, through her engagement with the broader form of storytelling combining words and pictures. Secondly, through her keen interest in and inspiration from children's drawings and storytelling, which has always been present in her comics manuals and takes the centre stage in her most recent manual, *Making Comics* (Barry, 2019). Proclaimed as "The self-help book of the year" by *The New York Times*, this book opens with a reflection on the liveliness and communicative power of very young children's drawings and unschooled drawing in general (Barry, 2019, pp. 3-9). *Making Comics*, like *Syllabus*, adopts the form of the composition notebook, a staple of North American school experience. While this incorporation of a scholastic form affirms what Aaron Kashtan identifies as Kindle-proofing or attachment to bookish materialities, it also generates nostalgic and intimate connections with the reader (Kashtan, 2018, pp. 70-76). In adopting the form of an exercise book or a

workbook, Barry affirms the practical essence of these manuals, which are not intended to be read as graphic novels but to be worked with.

Subtitled “Notes from an accidental professor,” *Syllabus* transposes versions of the “What It Is” and “Unthinkable Mind” courses, Barry has been giving at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and other venues for over two decades.³ In addition to these university courses, which were open to students of all disciplines and do not require proof of artistic skill, Barry also teaches very young, pre-kindergarten children. Many of her graphic novels, which are rich in collaged materials, incorporate her students’ drawings, highlighting the aesthetic and communicative power of different kinds of drawings and challenging conventional notion of skill. In this way, Barry succeeds in bridging the two very disparate worlds of children’s and adult creation, just like her comics manuals often incorporate life writing elements and bend genre boundaries. All these elements contribute to the distinctiveness and the broad scope of Barry’s comics manuals, which are, as she writes in *Making Comics*, “about the power of comics as a way of seeing and being in the world and transmitting our experience of it” (Barry, 2019, p. 14).

Naturally, there are also similarities with the traditional (comics) drawing manuals and colouring books, to which Barry herself turned to as a child, before following painting classes at Evergreen State College in the late 1970s. In one of the few autobiographical moments in *Picture This*, Barry recalls how important coloring books became to her when she was a child and found herself unable to draw (Barry, 2010, p. 102). Described as an activity book for adults (Barry, 2010, pp. 13-15) – a rare genre – *Picture This* is full of prompts to trace, copy and colour in, much more than any of Barry’s other manuals, even though later works, like *Syllabus*, also include coloring exercises (Barry, 2014, p. 66).

Notably, Barry’s interest in comics and art manuals is discernible in her earliest works. The first comic reprinted in Barry’s *Everything: Comics from around 1979-1981*, for instance, adopts the form of a mock correspondence course promising to reveal “hidden artistic talent” leading to immeasurable success and wealth (Barry, 2011, p. 14). The task given as a test is reproducing a poorly drawn, bare recognizable cow, after which the budding artists are requested to send twenty dollars to the Lynda de Bari Fine School of the Artistic. Barry’s more recent, serious courses do not promise glory and money. They provide, instead, accessible exercises and encouragement to overcome the inner criticism that prevents indulging in

³ See Burgess’s chapter on her experience attending the “Writing the Unthinkable” workshop at the Omega Institute in Tolmie (2022, pp. 13-27).

creative acts. For this, Barry frequently shares her own struggles, both as a child and as an adult, with making art while fearing it is not good enough. Eszter Szép convincingly interprets the “Two Questions” sequence in *What It Is* (Barry, 2008, pp. 123-135)⁴ as expressing and accepting a vulnerability that is essential to the creative act (Szép, 2020, p. 72). Through moments such as these, Barry underscores the importance of not judging drawings made by oneself or others as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. In an even more radical step, Barry encourages herself and her students (including her readers), to allow drawings to emerge freely, advocating for a kind of automatic drawing and storytelling process. In *Syllabus* and *Making Comics* and even the *One Hundred Demons* exercise, this form of automatic drawing is framed within specific constraints. This is comparable to Flowers’ copying exercise Flowers mentioned above: through imitating each other’s drawing gestures students learn “the difference between drawing to watch what happens and drawing to illustrate a premediated thought or mental image” (Flowers, 2020, p. 89). Flowers attributes learning this difference to Barry, who in turn learned it from the artist Marilyn Frasca, whose painting classes Barry followed at Evergreen State College. Copying reappears as an essential prerequisite for learning the language of comics in Misemer’s interview with Barry (Misemer, 2020, pp. 168-184).

As already mentioned above, *One Hundred Demons* was Barry’s first comics manual, while also being a worth of “autobifictionalography,” a term invented by Barry to challenge the assumption of factuality in autobiography. Already the title *One Hundred Demons* alludes to an exercise by a sixteenth-century Zen Buddhist monk that Barry discovered in a library book. This cathartic exercise takes the form of free ink drawing to release one’s inner monsters. While most of *One Hundred Demons* is about the different monsters of Barry’s childhood, youth and adulthood, the final section, “Paint Your Own Demon,” provides step-by-step instructions so that readers can also engage with the exercise and become, as a result, makers. This section is preceded by a full double page image of Barry painting in her pyjamas, parts of which are also used in the collaged pages in *One Hundred Demons* (Chute, 2010, p. 110). Hillary Chute points out how this image, with its unusual perspective, where we see Barry at work, without establishing direct visual contact with the reader, “shifts the narrative emphasis, and readerly interpretation, away from an identification of an authentic individual self to a confirmation, rather, of the act of writing” (p. 124).

⁴ That Barry submitted this particular sequence to the “comics” issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* no. 13, guest edited by Chris Ware confirms its centrality to her work (Barry, 2004).

Barry begins by tips on the tools required for the exercise, carefully breaking down the necessary steps so that it is understandable for readers who have never worked with ink, ink stones and ink brushes before. The section ends with a confession and the recommendation: “The paintbrush, inkstone, inkstick and resulting demons has been the most important thing to happen to me in years. TRY IT! You will dig it!”. This emphasis on the personal relevance of the demon exercise is characteristic of Barry’s mode of teaching, which is built on establishing a friendly, even non-hierarchical rapport with her students. The zooming in on relevant, creative tools also recurs in Barry’s later manuals, ranging from the unpopular crayons in *Syllabus* (Barry, 2014, pp. 87-91) or the immensely popular non-photo blue pencil in *Making Comics* (Barry, 2019, pp. 174-175). This in turn is comparable to discussions of specific drawing tools by Brunetti (2011, pp. 16-21) and Tomine (2024, pp. 21-39).

In contrast to the traditional comics manuals even the more personal mode of communicating adopted by Brunetti and Tomine, Barry adopts an almost confessional form of comics teaching that reflects on the scope of both the form and the reader or maker’s own creative capacities. It privileges the importance of expression over perceived talent. Drawing bridges with art therapy, Barry’s comics manuals occupy a genre of their own where a personal form of pedagogy anchored in encouragement and sharing is central. Making comics, making art and telling stories, if one follows Barry’s manuals, are a necessity, more than a vocation or a means of uncovering hidden talent. This also evokes of the most important of teaching: to transmit *something* that goes far beyond the confines of a class, a course or a study programme to become an integral part of a learner’s life.

In the context of literary education, Lynda Barry’s understanding of comics and pedagogy challenges the traditional divide between text and image, and promotes a distinctive way of conceiving literary reading and storytelling in a more inclusive, emotional, and experiential manner. Grounded in the idea that drawing is a form of thinking, interpreting, and remembering, her approach reframes the act of reading not merely as decoding written language, but as engaging with a multimodal narrative experience that plays with visual, textual, artistic and affective elements. Barry’s pedagogy highlights the value of creativity, play and autobiographical narrative as essential components of meaning-making in storytelling, particularly for students who may feel excluded from conventional literary practices. Moreover, by encouraging learners to explore their inner world through images and stories, she positions literature as a powerful tool for self-expression and human connection.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: TOWARDS RESIGNIFYING COMICS IN LITERARY EDUCATION

In conclusion, the integration of comics into contemporary literary education expands the scope of the didactics of literature by fostering a more nuanced understanding of literary competence as a complex process that encompasses multimodality, creativity, and critical thinking. Far from being a mere auxiliary resource, comics activate forms of meaning-making that require readers to navigate the interplay of text and image, negotiate narrative gaps, and interpret symbolic and aesthetic choices. By doing so, comics facilitate several forms of learning: they facilitate access to literature for diverse learners, providing resources that support early decoding, at a stage at which they have the ability to maintain interpretative challenges that strengthen critical and multimodal reading skills. Comics also bring valuable opportunities to engage deeply with literary devices in multimodal texts (such as focalization, metaphor pacing and visual rhetoric) and thus promote the creative dimension of visual storytelling and expression.

Beyond interpretation, comic-making further enrich literacy pedagogy. It promotes reflection on discursive conventions, by experimenting with narrative voice and structure, and promotes the cultivation of critical awareness. This creative practice foregrounds the embodied, emotional, and experiential dimensions of reading and storytelling, and positions learners not only as interpreters but also as meaning-makers. On this regard, this approach supports more inclusive, emotional, and experiential processes of reading and storytelling. Lynda Barry's pedagogy exemplifies this approach, visualising drawing as a form of thinking and memory that strengthens the connection between art, storytelling, and literary understanding. Her work illuminates how creative processes can function as both epistemic and affective tools within literary education.

Nevertheless, the reality in the academic sphere is that, despite the growing recognition of comics as valuable cultural and literary artefacts, they are still predominantly used as paratexts rather than as central pedagogical tools in literary education (Colomer & Fons, 2010, Vilaboa, 2025, Vilaboa et al., 2025). Although they have become more present in school libraries and more widely accepted as resources for promoting reading, comics remain underutilised in the teaching of literary interpretation and critical analysis. Their potential as core learning resources in literary curricula is yet to be fully realised, but the momentum is already there, as evidenced by recent research, including the Special Issue "Lectura en

viñetas: La intersección entre el cómic y la educación literaria”, coordinated by Clara Vilaboa, which we strongly encourage readers to explore.

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