

## **Comics in the Literature Classroom: How Multimodal Learning Can Create Better Citizens**

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In a discussion with Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust entitled “Do We Need to Rescue the Humanities?”, writer and cultural critic Leon Wieseltier answered with a resounding yes. We live in a “Republic of Opinion,” he asserted, and the humanities prepare us to be citizens of that republic. He argued that the humanities develop our imagination, that imagination “combat[s] tribalism” through empathy for others, and that empathy for others creates ethical citizens. Put this way, the stakes could not be higher. As a professor at a land-grant, state university, populated by a majority of students who grew up in small, insular communities across the upper Midwest, my imperative to lead students along this trajectory is clear. I strive to create assignments that push them to use their imaginations in different ways, to develop creative capacities in the literature classroom that will translate into practical skills in the workplace and empathetic action in the world. One such assignment involves students creating comics, a project I have assigned in two different literature courses in lieu of a final paper or exam. In the first course, Introduction to English Studies, students created a comics narrative about their identity as English scholars. In the second, Literature of Diverse Culture, students interpreted a portion of a course text by adapting it into a comic. In this essay, I will outline the theoretical and practical value of this assignment and provide a detailed description of its implementation.

Recent scholarship charges English instructors to reimagine what constitutes literacy and to incorporate various modes of texts in their courses. Jennifer Sanders and Peggy Albers assert that “as teachers, we have the responsibility to provide students with a range of opportunities that enables them to expand their repertoire of ways in which they can communicate what and how they know (3). The NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) “Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies” claims: “In personal, civic, and professional discourse, alphabetic, visual, and aural works are not luxuries, but essential components of knowing.” Discussions of multimodal literacy or multiliteracies have touted comics’ ability to prepare students for engaging with twenty-first century texts. According to Gabriel Sealy-Morris, “Comics provide a practical and active training for navigating the world of mass media, advertising, and government propaganda, in domains from the digital to the freeway” (46). Comics scholars Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven describe the medium of comics or graphic narrative as “cross-discursive,” meaning that, while the textual and visual elements remain separate, they also work together in a way that “calls a reader’s attention visually and spatially to the act, process, and duration of interpretation” (767). Such texts provide a unique interpretive challenge and opportunity for literature students.

Perhaps for these reasons, reading comics in the literature classroom has become common if not canonical, as the publication of the Modern Language Association’s *Teaching the Graphic Novel* almost a decade ago demonstrates.<sup>1</sup> However, much of today’s scholarship has focused on reading comics, not creating them. Composition studies has taken the next logical

step—as Lester Faigley states, “after years of attempting to teach students to analyze images,” he discovered that “they learn much more quickly when they create images on their own” (qtd. in Schiavone 8). Composition textbooks reflect this trend and a recent survey suggests that “multimodal assignments have, in many ways, become staples in writing classrooms” (Schiavone 358). The goals of the composition and literature classroom often overlap (critical thinking, argumentation, revision, etc.) and the benefits of multimodal assignments can greatly enhance teaching effectiveness for students of literature as well. This journal has recently published work that demonstrates this fact: Megan Keaton’s article on multimodal approaches to teaching William Blake and Mary Anne Myers’ article on her in-class cartooning assignment on Emily Dickinson. This article will contribute to the small but growing body of work on creating cartoons to develop multimodal literacy in the literature classroom.

Comics require students to engage with several modes simultaneously: textual, visual, spatial, aural, and possibly digital.<sup>2</sup> They offer a valuable balance of accessibility and difficulty. On the one hand, they are “one of the most accessible forms of multimodal text (insofar as no computing, audio, or video expertise is necessary)”; on the other hand, they “complicate notions of authorship, make sophisticated demands on readers, and create grammar and rhetoric as sophisticated as written prose, while also opening up new methods of communication often disregarded by conventional composition instruction” (Sealey-Morris 31). Some instructors might suspect that students already possess multimodal literacy and only require instruction in reading and producing alphabetical texts. Research suggests the opposite: “although

contemporary students are immersed in an era of ‘bain d’images,’ living in a visually rich world does not mean that youth are naturally visually literate” (Pantaleo 114).<sup>3</sup> Even if students constantly encounter multimodal texts, it does not follow that they automatically develop skills for approaching them critically. Similarly, even though students undoubtedly know what comics are, many are not particularly familiar with the medium. Kathryn Comer states that, despite “common scholarly assumptions about young people’s previous engagement with [comics],” her students were “neither fans nor experts” (78). My experience aligns with Comer’s. When I surveyed students who completed this assignment, one student wrote: “Before this I thought comics were just about superheroes and I enjoyed creating a comic because it helped me understand that it is actually pretty hard to do.”

Like my student, instructors might doubt the relevance of creating comics to literary studies. They might deny that this type of assignment could be rigorous or effective at assessing an English student’s skills. Again, the research and my experience demonstrate the opposite. Molly Scanlon outlines the productive disorientation of comics design: it “extends work we already do in the classroom, such as teaching conceptions of audience and genre. [Comics] however, also emphasize long-overlooked aspects regarding the genres and materiality of multimedia, such as composing in hybrid genres and developing structures for feedback and revision” (107). Sealey-Morris suggests that “the mixture of images with words presents no less than a whole new set of interpretive tasks,” and describes the comics-creating process as “labor-intensive production, physically and mentally” (46). Indeed, Chute argues that the narrative

capacity of comics is uniquely enhanced by its visual and tactile qualities, by the fact that the author's body is embedded in the text: "Comics is largely a hand-drawn form that registers the subjective bodily mark on the page; its marks are an index of the body, and its form lends its pages the intimacy of a diary. Comics works are literally manuscripts: they are written by hand." ("Comics Form" 112).<sup>4</sup> For Comer, creating comics enables the kind of global, transformative learning that often eludes traditional assignments. She states, "By asking students to produce as well as read comics, we can energize processes of invention, problem solving, design, and revision that may fundamentally influence their attitudes toward and abilities with diverse literacies" (76). Indeed, creating comics is "pretty hard to do"; it requires and assesses more skills than a traditional essay, not fewer.

This type of assignment elicits higher levels of student engagement as well. In Sealey-Morris's course, student investment, easily surpassed typical student engagement in (required) composition courses, resulting in high attendance, active participation, and a positive workshop dynamic. Even as they struggled with the technical and conceptual frustrations, students expressed relief at finding a course that they 'actually' (a telling and frequently used adverb) enjoyed and found intellectually stimulating. (100)

Many of my students talked about how much they enjoyed this assignment; some even thanked me for assigning this as a final project. When they were struggling to find time to study for all their exams and write all their final papers, they devoted more time to this assignment since it

required a different, even enjoyable kind of work. In the survey, 92% of my students said they preferred this project to a traditional writing assignment. In the comments, one student wrote, “I loved the nontraditional finish to the semester.”

## One Assignment – Two Courses

One of the benefits of this assignment is that it can be adapted and assigned in a variety of literature courses. I have taught it in two very different classes: an introduction to the major course and a 200-level course on literature of diverse cultures. In both, we read a comic first, so the students were already familiar with the medium. We also read portions of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* to develop vocabulary and theoretical approaches to reading and creating this kind of text. In particular, we discussed McCloud on closure, building effective transitions, creating a balance between adding and subtracting, and combining words and pictures. We focused on these components in our discussions of the comics that we read. For their final project, students created a comic of their own. The template for this assignment comprises three parts: a 10-15 panel comic, a 700-800 word reflection paper, and an open house gallery show. I assess this project according to four criteria: Creativity, Content, Analysis & Reflection, and Writing ([see rubric in Appendix A](#)). First, I will describe the two versions of this assignment, then discuss dissemination and, finally, offer some conclusions.

## English and Me

Introduction to English Studies (ENGL 151) is a required course for all English majors and minors, most of whom enroll in the Fall semester of their first year. In addition to traditional English majors and minors, our department offers specializations in writing or education. Consequently, even within a relatively homogeneous group of students, there are some significant differences in interest and experience. Our department recently redesigned the 151 curriculum, moving the literary theory overview that had been an essential component of this course to its own dedicated course. Now, Introduction to English Studies focuses on helping students build foundational skills for future coursework and develop an understanding of their chosen discipline. The course rotates through our faculty, but the shared learning objectives are as follows:

- Gain understanding of the history and disciplinary concerns of English studies.
- Develop skills in analyzing and interpreting literary texts.
- Participate in scholarly conversation with peers and a broader audience.
- Produce thoughtful, argumentative writing that follows the conventions of the discipline and MLA style.
- Conduct scholarly research using library resources.

I designed the comics assignment to address the first three course goals. In particular, it helped me address the first and arguably most elusive goal. I want students in this course to understand the kinds of questions English scholars ask, the kinds of work that they do, and the kinds of approaches to the world that they take. In other words, I want them to understand how English as

a discipline contributes to the Republic of Opinion. One of the textbooks I use to jumpstart this conversation, *Studying English: A Guide for Literature Students* by Robert Eaglestone and Jonathan Beecher Field, introduces the concept of “disciplinary consciousness.” Eaglestone and Field try to help students understand that, instead of looking for the right answer in a single text, they must develop a method for approaching all texts. Furthermore, the concept has metacognitive value; it emphasizes the importance of “knowing not just the content of a subject but also what you are doing and why” (41). Although they do not mention multiliteracy, they go on to situate the importance of this kind of knowing in a twenty-first century context: “As the world becomes more information rich—you can discover a fact instantaneously—knowing why a fact is important and what it means is even more significant” (41). The multimodality and “productive disorientation” of creating comics increases students’ metacognition, pushing them to focus on the process, method, and purpose of knowing, and not just getting the answer.

Before we begin the comics project, we have already read and discussed poetry, fiction, drama, and a graphic narrative, either Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Students have completed several short essays focused on close reading as well as a month-long research unit culminating in a critical essay. For their final assignment, students must create a comic that tells a story about themselves as English scholars. I want them to have the opportunity to reflect on what they learned and how they grew as scholars throughout the course. At this point in the course, we have established that all narratives contain a kind of argument, and I suggested that their comics narratives would be no different. Building on Eaglestone and Field’s concept of disciplinary consciousness, I ask them to consider what they



learned about the discipline, the challenges they faced throughout the semester, and the skills they developed. They should use the comics to show the reader/viewer something about themselves in relation to English. According to Hillary Chute, the formal aspects of comics render it an ideal medium for representing personal experience.

Because of its spatial conventions, comics is able to map a life, not only figuratively but literally...The ability to use the space of the page to interlace or overlay different temporalities, to place pressure on linearity and conventional notions of sequence, causality, and progression, is a reason comics can address itself powerfully to historical and life narrative. (“Comics Form” 108, 112)

Since the medium “places pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality—as well as on the idea that ‘history’ can ever be a closed discourse, or simply a progressive one,” it enables students to reflect on learning that is not necessarily linear and certainly not a closed discourse. At the end of her advanced composition course on graphic memoir, Kathryn Comer reimagines the standard personal narrative essay and asks her students to create their own graphic memoir. In her article “Illustrating Praxis: Comic Composition, Narrative Rhetoric, and Critical Multiliteracies,” she describes how this autobiographical approach to comics narrative aligns with her pedagogical goals to “encourag[e] heightened awareness of the rhetorical construction of narrative texts...Comics productively complicate students’ relationships to personal narrative” (76-77). My English and Me comics assignment emphasizes the nature of texts, reading, and authorship and, simultaneously, encourages the kind of rigorous personal reflection essential to first year students embarking on their careers as English majors or minors.

Initially, many students were concerned about their artistic ability. To allay these fears, I emphasize that this is not an art class, so they will not be graded on their drawing skill, but rather on their creativity and content. They could use any materials they chose: ink, pencils, paints, collage, etc. Most students drew freehand. Some students traced images or drew around images they cut and pasted, while others used online comics generators or design software. Instructors eager to add the digital mode to this assignment could require students to use the latter methods. Comer's students used the "affordable and user-friendly software" ComicLife which "provides page templates, text boxes, speech and thought balloons, visual effects, and other design details" (101). When I shared this assignment plan with a friend in the graphic design department, he told me that cartoonists often draw images large-scale, scan them, and reduce their size. I shared this tip with my students and many took advantage of this strategy to incorporate detail without working in miniature. Students were allowed to use whatever size and scale they chose, as long as it could be displayed for our open house. In addition to McCloud's book, I connected them with two additional, practical resources: Heather McAdams's website on [Designing Autobiographical Comic Strips](#) which outlines useful steps in the process of drawing comics including brainstorming, rough or quick sketch, revising, inking, and other "tips of the trade" and a Word template based on ReadWriteThink's [Comic Strip Planning Sheet](#) which they could adapt as needed.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to creating comics, they wrote a reflection paper on their decision-making processes. In the reflection, I ask them to respond to the following:

- Identify your comic’s “thesis statement,” the overall argument you were trying to make.
- What were your goals for the comic, the issues, topics, or themes that you were trying to convey?
- Analyze the comic as you would any literary text. What argument did the text make and how did it make it?

Since the comics medium is entirely new to most students, the written reflection enables them to plan and reflect on their project in a more familiar format. While there is no written thesis statement included in the comic itself, I wanted to ensure that students had this singular, argumentative focus in mind. One student survey claimed that the project’s biggest challenge was “coming up with a thesis,” and others also claimed to have struggled with content or narrative. I believe asking them to map out this content in two different media—comics (multi-modal) and alphabetic (mono-modal)—reiterates the skills that the assignment seeks to develop. Furthermore, it gives them a chance to directly reference course texts, such as *Studying English*, and frame their narrative arguments in terms that may not be explicit in the comics themselves.

## Learning to Adapt

The other course in which I have used this assignment is Literature of Diverse Cultures (ENGL 249). About half of the students in this class were majors, but, since the course fulfills a university and a regental requirement, the other half were students from across campus with majors such as global studies, agricultural science, civil engineering, visual arts, and political

science. My course description emphasizes the global utility of the course and tries to articulate how the skills developed in it prepare students to participate in a Republic of Opinion:

In order to be a good citizen of a democracy, you need to be able to imagine and empathize with people who are different than you. Reading literature about and by such people cultivates the imagination necessary for empathy. In this course, we will examine how the assigned texts address issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class and how they represent and critique the diverse society in which we live. In addition to reading and discussing literary texts, we will research and discuss the historical and cultural contexts in which they were written—how the texts speak to the world in which they were written and the world in which they continue to be read.

Again, the comics assignment is the final project that the students complete. Up to this point, most of the assessments were more traditional writing assignments: this assignment offers students a different medium for literary analysis. As opposed to the Introduction to English Studies version, in this course, the comics assignment is the culmination of brief unit on adaption. All but one of the texts we read in this class have been adapted for another medium: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In general, the course encourages students to adapt the way they think about class, race, gender, and sexuality, to imagine things from a different perspective, and to approach problems creatively and critically. Adapting a text translates this metaphorical concept into the literal, tangible realm. In preparation for the assignment, I assigned brief portions of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* and Timothy Corrigan's *Film and*

*Literature*, and lectured on these works and adaptation studies in general. Then, we discussed what they thought motivates adaptations, especially of the texts we read. What changes in the translation from one medium to another? What is gained and what is lost?

Our work in this course focused on observing the choices that an author makes and then interpreting those choices. To frame the idea of authorial choice in terms of multimodal learning and to think about the relationship between choice and mode, Keaton uses the term “modal affordances.” Based on multimodal composition research, Keaton argues that “we can help students develop strategies for approaching new composing situations by teaching them to analyze modal affordances—what each mode allows the reader and/or composer to do—and make rhetorical decisions based on those affordances” (93). As the number of modes increase, the choices available for readerly analysis or authorial deployment also increase. The comics assignment forces students to think about authorial choices from the other side—as they make them themselves.

Hutcheon claims that “adapters are first interpreters and then creators,” and this is the philosophy I want students to embrace (18). I encouraged them to think about adaptation as a form of interpretation. We spent a lot of time during the semester building close reading skills—with discussion, study questions, and writing assignments. We practiced interpreting passages from a text based on concrete observations. In the final project, they applied those skills by adapting a portion of one of the course texts into a different medium. To scaffold this work, they completed a topic proposal and a workshop of the reflection paper. The topic proposal pushed them to answer the above questions (What changes in the translation from one medium to

another? What is gained and what is lost?) in terms of their own adaptation and to ensure that the adaptation was driven by interpretation. The reflection paper workshop encouraged them to use this part of the assignment in tandem with the art work, to think through their interpretive argument and plan for its execution while they were still creating the comics. Although Keaton suggests that ending a multimodal project such as this with a written reflection “may send the message to our students that the alphabetic traditional essay ultimately has a higher value than other modes and media,” I would argue that using a written reflection alongside the multimodal comics provide students with an additional method for meeting the assignment’s goals (115). It gives students a chance to discuss any problems or difficulties with the medium and perhaps describe different plans that they found unable to execute (again emphasizing “modal affordances”). Moreover, it gives them a chance to deploy the analytical skills we built throughout the course in an additional, if mono, mode. As in the Introduction to English Studies version, the reflection provides students the opportunity to explicitly discuss their work in relation to the comics and adaptation theory that we read.

## **Dissemination**

In both classes, during the final exam period, we held an open house to display the students’ work. Students were encouraged to invite friends and family and I created a flyer to post around campus, email to colleagues and administrators, and to share with students from other classes. The open house was organized like a poster session—students stood by their work while our guests circulated and discussed it with them. I felt this was a wonderful way to wrap

up the course and upon reading the survey results, I was pleasantly surprised that many of the students described some aspect of dissemination as the most rewarding part of the assignment. I had hoped that the open houses would give students a chance to observe another set of choices and interpretive possibilities in their classmates' work and, indeed, their survey comments emphasized how much they enjoyed viewing the comics and discussing them with others. One student claimed that the most rewarding part of the assignment was: "seeing all the different ways people interpreted the assignment." Students in Introduction to English Studies enjoyed the opportunity to develop relationships with other majors which, I believe, will positively impact the major culture on campus. One student wrote: "Not only did this assignment help students to better understand the ways that graphic novels are constructed, but it also enabled students to reflect on their own experiences and hone their artistic abilities. In addition, students were able to view their classmates' work and relate to their experiences through this assignment." A student in Literature of Diverse Cultures enjoyed "explaining to professors and others what I had changed and for what reasons. By offering explanation for my use of artistic license, it helped me articulate my thought process on the analysis of the literature in the form of decision-making." In addition, the open house provides an opportunity to raise the profile of the department and showcase the kind of work that humanities students do (work that too often remains mysterious to colleagues in other disciplines).

## Conclusion

An assignment that targets the development of multimodal literacies can provide a transformative experience for students of literature. Creating comics enables them to build crucial, discipline-specific skills, including critical thinking, textual analysis, argument-building, awareness of audience, and disciplinary consciousness. In addition, creating comics prepares them to enter a world full of diverse and complex texts and people. Writing essays and reading comics can do some of this work. But, as Sealey-Morris avers, “Permitting, or encouraging, students to *produce* their own comics, however, opens up a whole new understanding of authorship and authority that may have transformative effects” (48, emphasis mine). Professors in the humanities continually run up against the question why study English? Why do the humanities matter? It is important to develop assignments that help students—both majors and nonmajors—to leave the classroom with answers to those questions and with the skills to broadcast that message throughout our Republic of Opinion. They are the future administrators, legislators, educators, voters—they are the citizenry that will determine the future of this country.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Catherine Labio points out, “comic” has become a generic term that includes graphic novel, *bande dessinée*, manga, et.al. (124). This is the term I have adopted here and in the classroom.

<sup>2</sup> I include aural thanks to Catherine Khordoc’s suggestion that comics include “visual sound effects” (qtd. in Comer 100).

<sup>3</sup> Pantaleo cites several studies on this point, including Avgerinou and Ericson (1997), Avgerinou (2009), and the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2006 and 2010).

<sup>4</sup> In both *Disaster Drawn* and *Graphic Women*, Chute connects this bodily mark to the form’s ability to witness, in her words, its “aesthetics and ethics” (*Disaster* 4).

<sup>5</sup> In a later version of the assignment I also provided “How Art Spiegelman Designs Comic Books: A Breakdown of His Masterpiece, *Maus*.”

## Appendix A: Sample Rubric

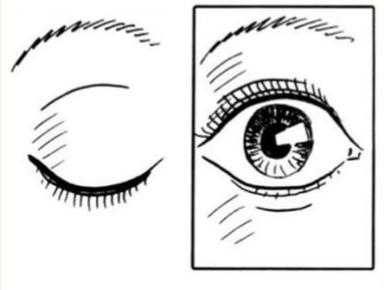
Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
CREATIVITY	23-25 Very creative; final product exhibits ample effort and consideration	20-22 Creative; evident effort and consideration	18-19 Somewhat creative; elements of effort and consideration	17 or lower Lacks creativity; lacks effort and consideration
Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
CONTENT	23-25 Ample information and/or detail in the comic; ideas very well developed; goes beyond assignment guidelines	20-22 Solid information and/or detail in the comic; ideas fairly well developed; somewhat exceeds assignment guidelines.	18-19 Essential information and/or detail in the comic; ideas adequately developed but could be further expanded; satisfies assignment guidelines.	17 or lower Limited information and/or detail in the comic; ideas truncated; could go further w/assignment.
Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
ANALYSIS & REFLECTION	27-30 Sophisticated analysis; obvious evidence in the that student has fully developed ideas, opinions, and analyses; original and nuanced synthesis.	24-26 Moves beyond basic comprehension to analysis; obvious evidence in the that student has developed ideas, opinions, and analysis.	20-23 Attempts to move beyond basic comprehension to analysis; student still developing ideas, opinions, and analysis.	20 or lower Little attempt to move beyond basic comprehension; little is offered in to reveal own ideas, opinions, and analysis.

WRITING	18-20	16-17	14-15	13 or lower
	Writing is strong, clear, and engaging. Sentences are complete, concise, and varied. Vocabulary is varied and accurate. Verbs are strong and active. Follows rules of grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.	Writing is generally strong and clear. Most sentences are complete, concise, and varied. Vocabulary is mostly varied and accurate. Verbs are mostly strong and active. Follows rules of grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.	Language is sometimes difficult for the reader to understand. Sentences and vocabulary are somewhat varied and accurate. Some verbs are strong and active. Generally follows rules of grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling but contains some errors.	Language is unclear and difficult for the reader to understand. Sentences often incomplete, wordy, or confused. Problems with word choice and contains many weak verbs. Repeated or significant errors in grammar, punctuation, usage, and spelling.

## Appendix B: Sample Promotional Posters

# English & Me

### Comic Strip Gallery

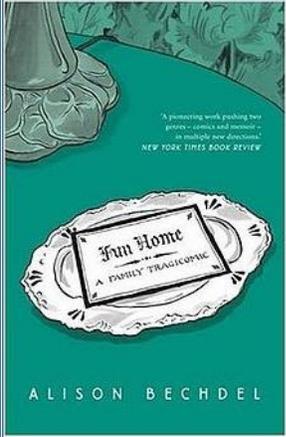


**Introduction to English Studies (ENGL 151)**

Stop by a poster session featuring student-made comic strips that explore what our textbook calls "disciplinary consciousness." Students will tell a story about themselves as English majors, reflect on what they have learned and who they have become over the course of the semester. Come, see, and discuss their work with us.

**Tuesday 12/13 9:15-11:15am**

Crothers Engineering Hall  
Room 215  
Questions??? [nicole.flynn@sdstate.edu](mailto:nicole.flynn@sdstate.edu)



The book cover for 'Fun Home' features a green background with a white plate in the center. On the plate is a rectangular card with the title 'Fun Home' and the subtitle 'A FAMILY TRAGICOMIC'. Above the plate, there is a quote from the New York Times Book Review: 'A pioneering work pushing two genres - comics and memoir - in multiple new directions.' The author's name, ALISON BECHDEL, is at the bottom.

*Adapters are first interpreters and then creators.*  
— Linda Hutcheon

Literature of Diverse Cultures  
presents

**ADAPTATIONS**

Friday, May 5  
2-3pm  
Crothers 223

Enjoy student adaptations of:  
Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home*,  
Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*, or  
Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth*  
into dramatic scenes or comics of their own.



The playbill has a yellow background with a white house silhouette. At the top, it says 'PLAYBILL' and 'CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE'. The title 'FUN HOME' is written in large, colorful letters (red, blue, and black) with a small illustration of a family inside the letter 'O' of 'HOME'.

## Appendix C

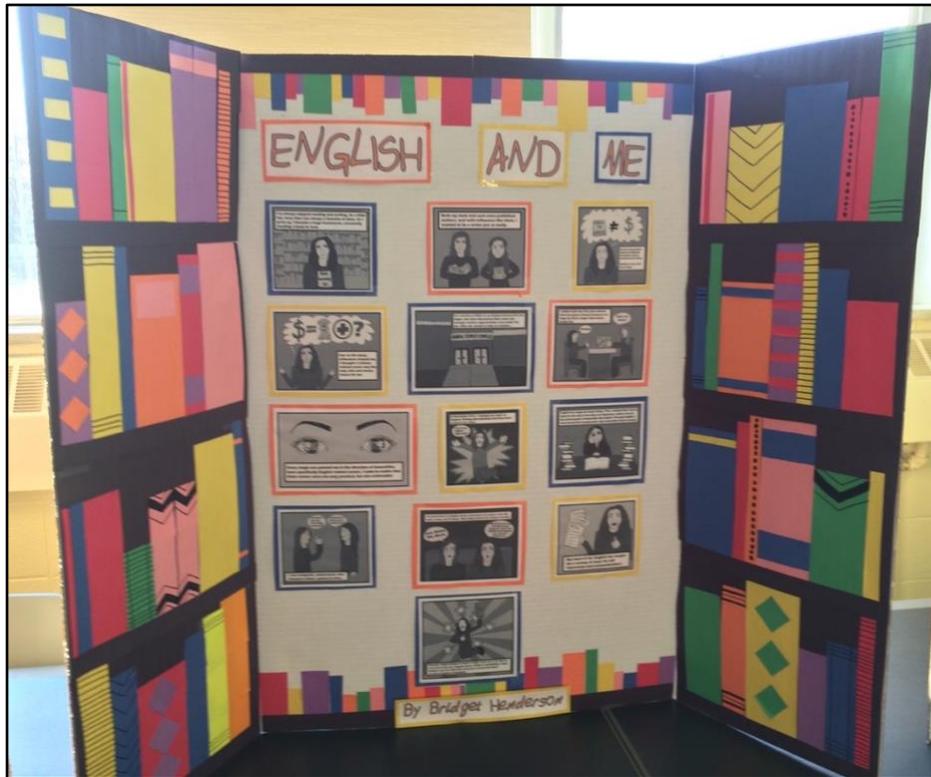


Figure 1: English and me project for Introduction to English Studies



Figure 2: Adaptation of Zadie Smith's "White Teeth" for Literature of Diverse Cultures

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