# USING COMICS AS A STRATEGY FOR LEARNING INTERCULTURAL VALUES

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## Abstract italiano

Lo sviluppo di capacità di comunicazione interculturale permette di affrontare con successo le sfide della convivenza e della coesione sociale. Vilà-Baños (2008) afferma inoltre che l'istruzione formale non è l'unico responsabile per lo sviluppo di queste competenze. Alla luce di questa considerazione, abbiamo creato una serie di laboratori pratici, appoggiandoci sulla nostra lunga esperienza, con l'obiettivo di aiutare un gruppo selezionato di persone. La finalità generale era quella di promuovere i valori fondamentali che costituiscono la base delle grandi religioni e che si trovano anche nel pensiero secolare della società contemporanea. L'implementazione è stata effettuata in due fasi, una nel 2010 con un campione di 97 soggetti e l'altra nel 2015 coinvolgendo 173 partecipanti.

## Parole chiave

Valori, intercultura, comunicazione, laboratorio, fumetto

## English Abstract

Developing intercultural communication skills enables us to successfully confront the challenge of coexistence and social cohesion. Vilà-Baños (2008) also states that formal education is not solely responsible for the development of these competencies. Bearing this in mind, we have created a series of practical workshops, using our ample experience, with the aim of helping a select group of people. The general objective was to transmit the existence of fundamental values that form the basis of the major religions and that are also found in secular thinking in current society. The implementation was performed in two phases, one in 2010 with a sample of 97 study subjects, and the other in 2015 which counted with 173 participants.

## Keywords

Values, intercultural, communication, education, workshop, comics

# 1. Introduction

Education in values constitutes a fundamental pillar in social structure and the power of society, and therefore in the teaching and training of society, as the pillar that strengthens the democratic system of the nation (Carrero-Albornoz, 2013).

Modern day education should be able to provide solutions to the problems and challenges that arise in today´s society, where multicultural reality creates the need for new skills. Vilà-Baños (2008) believes that being aware of cultural diversity is one of the possible answers, although it is not the only one. Developing intercultural communication skills enables us to successfully confront the challenge of coexistence and social cohesion. The same author also states that formal education is not solely responsible for the development of these competencies. Bearing this in mind, we have created a series of practical workshops, using our ample experience, with the aim of helping a select group of people. These workshops will be described in more detail shortly.

Most of the numerous reflections made on interculturalism stem from socio-cultural situations and investigations carried out on groups of students from diverse cultures in schools (Salinas et al., 1994).

The inclusion of any learning strategy or way of teaching in education, intercultural curricular project stage, and respective cycle and classroom settings, allows us to plan specific spaces and times, as well as to foresee what tools are needed for the development, monitoring and evaluation that will ensure success with the students (Morales- Puertas, 2000).

However, we may have missed the fact that this attention not only falls on the school, but also on the parents, communities, rulers, social leaders, communication media and other individuals and institutions, who cannot unload their responsibility to the educational institutions. This idea is argued for and supported by authors such as Ballesteros, Aguado and Malik (2014).

The development of this study aims to push forward the establishment of intercultural values that are commonly shared by all cultures present in our society in general, and in partnerships and educational environments in particular.

The emerging situation provokes the imperative and constant need for change and the evolution of the individuals as well as the institutions. The latter should commit themselves more with subjects that are so near and so necessary such as cultural inequalities and ethnic, cultural and religious minorities, as mentioned by Chen and Sujarittanonta (2014). This results in the generalized need for education and literacy that is directed to the public. This is due to the fact that, as consistently shown by research, the consumption of communication media does not guarantee that these

topics are viewed in an intelligent, creative and constructive manner (Aguaded, 2014).

It is with the design of curricular materials for education in intercultural values, in this case, the comic book, that we attempt to facilitate the task of the educator. Mendoza and De-Contreras (1999) indicate that «the use of resources favours the development of the imagination because it is necessary to adapt materials from different origins, to the didactic needs required».

Our research starts with the general objective that consists on describing the potentialities of informal teaching/training in the way of workshops for the training of citizens on education in intercultural values through the use of comic books, from the conceptual, attitudinal and value domains.

## 2.     Materials used for intercultural education

Taking into account the scientific literature available, an initial conclusion was been reached; the clear need for developing and designing teaching materials that would enable schools, institutions, associations, etc. to offer an education in intercultural values. This section will describe the experiences, work, and activities that are need it to show the importance of intercultural education. These materials are the link between theory and educational practice (Buxarrai, 2000, p. 100).

The concept of intercultural communication identifies itself with the set of communicational and intercultural capabilities and abilities, as has been aptly defined by Vilà-Baños (2014). In order to bolster intercultural communication and to be able to jointly construct a social model that is based on coexisting, the members of society need these communicative and intercultural abilities.

If we peruse published literature, we can see that there are many authors who have focused their studies on intercultural education. Among them are Aguado, Alvarez, Ballesteros, Gil, Jimenez, Sacristan and Malik, who are directly responsible for producing models and materials for the teaching of intercultural values. Salinas et al. (1994) have indicated that general programmes should be created, involving and motivating all social groups, including minorities, thus suppressing ideological concepts that arbitrarily rank cultures labelling them as worthy or less worthy. Escotet (1992) tell us that education should encourage multiculturalism and acceptance of other cultures and different in religious beliefs from our own. One can live within a multicultural society without losing one´s identity.

In all the Autonomous Communities of Spain it is clear that schools embrace students from diverse cultural backgrounds and they all

positively value this cultural pluralism, which is capable of promoting attitudes of tolerance and respect between students, thus enriching coexistence. In general, intercultural education is seen as a concept that is applicable to the entire school population and, therefore, as one of the principles which should be present in educational centre projects through the inclusion and development of curriculum schedules so that intercultural education facilitates equal opportunities chiefly in deprived minority groups. On the other hand, Morales-Puertas (2000) points out that social and cultural cohesion strategies can be supported by the following concepts:

1.  increasing ethno-cultural identification and multicultural competence: these values should be promoted and fostered so that knowledge and understanding of these concepts can be furthered applied in all educational centres (learning materials and developing technical assistance);

2.  improving intergroup relationships: these are strategies which are designed to strengthen the raising of critical awareness about relationships and the particular way of perceiving things (cooperative work, work plans and solidarity work);

3.  overcoming prejudices, stereotypes and ethnographic beliefs: it is a question of starting a programme of skills directed to the structure of the knowledge that the pupils have about the contact groups (creation of an atmosphere, well-known people as role models, non-competitive contacts and activities at an equal level);

4.  overcoming intercultural conflicts, generated from multicultural coexistence: this is a series of techniques that attempt to put students in a constructive, positive position for the approaching and working out solutions for daily conflicts, both in the classrooms, and their immediate socio-cultural environment (resolving conflicts, role-playing, simulation, conflict maps, etc.).

In our specific case, we are members of a creative team that created five comic books and an educational guide, all of which were developed within an educational project called Common Values. To make sure that the design of this constructive proposal would respond to the contextual demands of the educational and social environment, it was necessary to take into account a series of theoretical references and some basic canons, which helped us during the development process. In this sense, it was necessary to bear in mind the characteristics of the curricular, didactic and illustrative model within which our intervention was projected.

Much care was taken and a thorough analysis of these sources was carried out, so that the aforementioned materials would guarantee the quality and effectiveness needed, both in the pedagogical aspects and those related to expression, format, structure, presentation and content.

Depending on the educational model we take as a reference, both the function and the role of the curriculum materials will be different. Therefore, we have highlighted the most relevant data of the materials we proposed to use. These materials appear as a result of participation in a project funded by the European Commission, Directorate General of Justice, Freedom and Security, within the INTI (integration of immigrants) program. The project was developed in the centre of the Lai-Momo Cooperative and Eurodialog and conducted in collaboration with Africa and Mediterraneo (Italy), Comunicar Group (Spain), l'Afrique dessinée (France), Translit (Spain), Le Comptoir du livre (Belgium), CS Associazione di Cooperazione allo Sviluppo (Italy), Agronomi senza frontiere (Italy) and Fumo di China (Italy).

The INTI Project is a funding program for transnational projects and aims to promote the integration of immigrants in countries that are member states of the European Union. The European Commission has highlighted the importance of this integration on its communiqué on immigration, integration and employment.

After briefly having placed the comic book within a conceptual framework, we will now enter wholly into the analysis of the content of the titles that we have presented and obtained as a result of the project mentioned above.

## 3.    The comic as a means of graphical-visual learning

A comic book, understood or not as a work of art, or as a means of communication, or from any other point of view, is something that is very complex, says Castillo (2004). They are known around the world by different names. In Spain 'historietas' or 'tebeos', in Latin America 'chistes', 'monitos' or 'muñequitos', in the USA 'comics or comic books', in France 'bandes dessinées' or in Italy 'fumetti'. It all comes down to the same thing, cartoons or comics. They are considered to be a means of communication that connects people, and they are attractive and easy to follow because they consist of pictures that makes for very pleasant reading; sometimes the story is only made up of drawings and sometimes it also has written words (Acevedo, 1987). This same author (1987) also points out that comics are an important part of contemporary media, appearing in the form of weekly, bi-weekly magazines or daily newspapers.

The recipients of the main project are European citizens that wish to address the realities presented in the five comic books, but overall, the European citizens of tomorrow, the youth. To reach this type of public, the comic book is presented, without a doubt, as a type of communication, efficient education and attractive media. We define the comic book as a set of texts and images, and consider it a sequential art that can make use of

all the advantages of literature together with the strength of the images to illustrate ideas. They facilitate the identification between the reader and the character, and the emergence of thoughts through the direct meeting of stories and specific experiences.

The study on the establishment of intercultural values shared by part of all the cultures present in our society in general, and in associations and educational environments specifically, demanded extensive direct observation, therefore, only a part of the general population was selected as a representative sample. In our case specifically, the study was developed in two different phases: the pilot study was implemented in 2010 with a sample of 97 individuals that belonged to three associations and Teaching degree students from the University of Huelva. Also, the second phase was applied in 2015 to another sample of 173 individuals that were distributed in two associations in the city of Huelva and students enrolled in the Social Education degree at the University of Huelva. Both bodies of work have allowed us to gain a more global and longitudinal vision of the problem analysed, taking into account the social, cultural and economic changes that have taken place in Spain in the past five years. As Spain has gone through and still is, immersed in an economically expansive period, while at the same time it is socially in a stage of economic shrinkage and an acute social crisis that without a doubt has had a great impact on the problem analysed. These have brought to light the weaknesses of intercultural policies and the real scope of Spanish society (Álvarez and Gutiérrez, 2013).

## 4. The didactic Project Guide

This guide was designed to provide teachers with tools and materials for the use of comics in educational work. In addition, this guide delved into the concepts that are mentioned in the dialogues, embodied by a character or interpreted by the protagonists. Each of the five units, one for each comic, was composed of different sections: the message, i.e. an introductory section focused on the moral value selected for the unit, and how it has been formulated and interpreted in religions and secular beliefs. The materials section has to do more directly with the comic, as it contains the synopsis and an explanation of how the chosen value and some social issues are introduced by the story[1]. To support these two first sections, we have an anthology of testimonials - sacred texts, secular texts and comments - and finally, comprehension in depth exercises that are

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[1] The five stories refer to the following topics: integration of religion in society, the deviation of the messages processed by religions and ideologies, the principle of social integration, effective and accountable solutions for an ecological care of the planet, identity and miscegenation, dialogue between cultures, the notion of double membership.

closely linked to the comic. Essays, fact sheets about major religions, a glossary, a directory of web pages and a videography complete the tools the guide put at the disposal of the teacher (Repetti, Federici and Salvarani, 2005).

The guide has tried to take into account the requirements and modalities of a class. Therefore, each comic can be approached both as unique story (that youngsters can read at home and analyse through exercises concerning its content) or as a set of thematic and narrative elements, each of which can be the object of a class. At the same time, it can be enriched with references to the cited texts, with exercises and proposed workshops.

In conclusion, we would like to draw attention to the multidisciplinary nature of the material. It can be used by teachers who, within the different curricula of the countries in which the diffusion is foreseen, work with history, philosophy, civic education, literature, religious education and art education.

## 5.    The design of the five comics considered in the project

Forgiveness, deemed to be an elevated form of love, non-violence, respect for others, sharing and non-discrimination are five values that are common to different religions and to secular beliefs. These values were selected and inspired some stories, which were transformed into scripts for comics whose production were entrusted to professional cartoonists Association l'Afrique Desinée, compiling them in the five comics listed below.

### 5.1.    The reserve

The Earth, set in an unknown future, where power is held by an elite few, a group of intelligent beings who live on the moon. The Earth, a sprawling city, where manipulated religious communities live with difficulties. There is a bloody battle, and the easiest way to survive is to help people kill each other. A storm of explosive events descends upon the lives of the characters.

This album from, the Common values collection, is about the manipulation of religious messages that incite hate among people, and helps us not to forget the right of each person to a dignified existence through non-violence and dialogue. This is the first collaboration between the Ivorian artist Titi Faustin, the Belgian writer Thomas Gunzig and the Cameroonian Christophe N´galle Edimo, who has adapted the original novel by the Belgian writer.

### 5.2.    Homework

In the high school of a small provincial town, somewhere in the middle of France, a class is experiencing the problem of discrimination. They reflect on the possible solutions proposed by religions, secular thought, and the rules of the state to eradicate this phenomenon.

This is a comic, where the favourite subjects of the writer Abdourahman Waberi are found: a fusion of cultures and double sense of identity, the existential dilemma of identity and interculturality as non-exclusive problems of immigrants and their families. After all, the human condition is the same everywhere.

The story is based on the original novel *Schoelcher, Scheherazade Saïd et les autres* and the drawings of the Cameroonian artist Chrisany, which are fully in line with the style of writing of Waberi, making them a good match for the comic book.

### 5.3.    Hisham and Isolda

This story takes place in an anonymous city which could be found anywhere in Europe. In this city, we find a young 14-year old African boy named Hisham and a French girl called Isolda. Hisham has a bird, and he goes to school. Isolda and her French parents, the problematic DJ Boss, and her friends are the other characters in the story. It is in this bedlam of life and romantic relationships that join Hisham with the people in the neighbourhood, where this magnificent comic, from the collection Common values, deals with the respect for others and the social integration of immigrants.

The Cameroonian partnership of Edimo and Simón Pierre Mbumbo, join in writing a story which is both tender and lifelike at the same time. Based on the original novel *Hisham and Isolda* by Carl Norac, it is a book for everyone, made up of wonderful poetry, enhanced by dazzling colours.

### 5.4.    The appeal

The 'Day of Understanding' is being celebrated in the city: a concert, competitions, and all the trappings of a happy holiday. It is a celebration, but it is forced! The city is divided into religious-based Community zones. Society is on a fast track towards a military conflict. Is it a real nightmare? Not at all! In this fictional world, which is similar to our own, forgiveness arises as a necessary environment for dialogue and reconciliation.

This comic book deals with the Common Values found in religions and secular thought. It is a science fiction story that allows the dynamic and expressive graphics of Pat Masioni (Congo) to be displayed. The duo Edimo-Masioni has created a brilliant adaptation of the original novel *The Appeal*, by the Belgian writer Pascale Fonteneau.

### 5.5.    If you follow me around the world

An Indian village is living through a period of drought. In the neighbouring village, the well still works. Due to the selfishness and the defeatism of the inhabitants of the two villages, the young Ranji decides to travel around the world. A Hare, which is, in fact a genie, accompanies him. The Hare is a friendly pet, who uses his power to protect Ranji on his journey to the heart of the evil of the Earth. They travel around the world and each of them talks about their problems.

From the original theme by the writer Carl Norac, and Christophe Edimo and Fifi Mukuna (Africans) have adapted a beautiful story for everyone using great poetry. It is enhanced by dazzling colours, and has a sacred commitment: to narrate in simple words, the meaning of ecology and the measure of man and sharing and the sense of responsibility towards present and future generations, since an ecological crisis threatens the balance of religious and secular thought values on which societies are supported.

## 6.    The pedagogical-didactical possibilities of the comic in institutions

Given the importance of this graphical-visual medium, in this research, it could not be ignored as an educational resource and learning strategy, as well as a reading resource and personal expression. It should be integrated in institutions, and its most positive aspects for the learning process used. It should also be analysed critically, giving spaces for reading and comprehension, and looking for collective and individual guidelines for the overall understanding of their messages; it is undoubtedly a transcendental work in any formative action.

As for its didactic use, the possibilities of using comic books in the classroom and, at any institution in general, are very extensive and depend on both the interest that educators have in making use of iconographic language, and the prior motivation of students. In any case, the use of an expressive language must respond to a serious didactic planning, where the educational intentions of the use of the medium is clearly shown.
We could start with the objectives on the use of the comic book in intercultural environments (Rodriguez-Diéguez, 1991), such as:

1.    to reflect on the verbal-iconic language through verbal language, in order to translate or transform the verbal information to iconic or vice versa;
2.    to facilitate the analysis through the differentiation of the elements of the comic;

3. to identify the expressive elements and their different types through the direct study of the comics;
4. to create a comic from a script, integrating techniques of group work, individual work and oral or written expression skills;

Through these objectives, we can employ the comic as a learning and communication strategy, using it as an effective language learning tool, enabling us to analyze high diffusion mass media in an easy and straightforward manner (Rodriguez-Diéguez, 1991).

This is an aspect of the comic that should be researched, but which has not been highlighted up until now, largely because comics have not been considered to be a formal method of controlled study, and secondly, because in the world of the comic, two trends have dominated: the historical, and more recently the educational (Muro-Munilla, 2004).

## 7. Integration into the general training project

Understanding images, and in the case of comics, sequential images, together with scripts and cartoons, provide a motivating resource for students to become interested in the various subjects of the training plan. At the same time, uninitiated students can be introduced to the world of comics and its content, and furthermore, those who are familiar with the genre, can increase their knowledge.

It is possible to create stories about almost anything, at the same time working with various language techniques such as dialogue, monologue, or colloquial expressions. The didactic use of comics in the classroom could go from the reading of this method on social communication, by choosing from the wide variety of comics on the market, to those which provide a wide spectrum and application in the classroom. In this way, a critical reading of the medium could assist students to overcome social clichés and patterns which appear in mainstream comics, promoting the knowledge of the mechanisms that this type of media uses.

In addition, a technical knowledge of the genre can be proposed by the institution, initiating and studying in depth along with the students, both visual instruments (settings, plans, sequencing, kinetic signs, etc.) as in the verbal instruments (cartridges, texts, bubbles, etc.).

In the case of technical training, the knowledge of the comic may have, unlike other levels or learning styles, a purpose in itself, encouraging knowledge of the cartoon structures and therefore their communication possibilities. This knowledge could prepare professionals in the fields of education, communication, advertising, or human relations, where the comic is essential.

Lastly, we can also initiate students on the creation of comics and on the production of messages from this graphical-visual medium. Evidently, this should not be the first step. Insofar as it is necessary, the language of the medium and its own mechanisms must be clear. The process of the creation of comics, as with any audiovisual medium, is subject to development, ranging from the selection of the initial theme, its related documentation, to the creation of the literary and technical guide notes, graphic elaboration of vignettes (iconic realization), sequencing, assembly, and edition of the models, as well as the printing phase and distribution among the final readers.

The creation of comics in the classroom promotes research work, offering strong motivation, involving meaningful learning within the teaching process, and so, complying with the new psychological currents of functional learning.

The combination of verbal and iconic language allows for the promotion of a comprehensive development of different dimensions of personality, in an interdisciplinary synthesis. According to professors at the UNED (Aguaded & Martínez-Salanova, 1998), with the characters and through them the students themselves - speak (linguistic expression), move (dynamic expression), express themselves through gestures and grimaces (dramatic expression), relate (social expression), and situate themselves in contexts (natural expression), in comics.

The objectives of the didactic use of comics in the classroom must always respond to the necessity of critical and creative reading, which, at present, needs to be developed in order not to be authentic 'iconic illiterate' members of the audiovisual communication society.

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