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## The Role of Critical Thinking in Reader Perceptions of Leadership in Comic Books

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## THE ROLE OF CRITICAL THINKING IN READER PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN COMIC BOOKS

### Introduction

Comic book characters and stories are becoming increasingly present in popular media formats, such as video games, television, and film. In addition, comic books are continuing to be used in educational settings as learning tools. Numerous organizations and websites provide materials and curriculum for educators to use and to implement comic books in their classrooms. As the use of comics in education continues to increase, educators need more research that supports the use of comics for specific outcomes. Furthermore, continued research on the educational benefits of comic books can help educators use the medium to address specific problems seen within their own classrooms. In a Lapp, DeVere Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey study (2011/2012) they determined that teachers agreed that comics can be useful in the classroom, but a deficiency existed with how to integrate them appropriately into curriculum. In addition, educators may be hesitant to use comics in the classroom because of bias about comics' credibility and because teacher training includes verbal "narratives as the only legitimate cultural material worth studying" (Duncan & Smith, 2013, p. 279).

What do comic books have to do with leadership and critical thinking skills? Few studies specifically address how readers use critical thinking when reading comics. Yet, comics may be useful to help address the current problem identified in this study. This study sought to take a specific problem within the educational realm, in this case leadership and critical thinking skills, and understand how comic books could address or possibly improve the concerns. Leadership behaviors have the potential to be more ethical, moral, and efficient for individuals who form their leadership perceptions using a critical thinking process (Flores et al., 2012; Stedman, 2009). Furthermore, employers see higher educational institutions as responsible for teaching critical thinking skills (Casner-Lotto & Benner, 2006). Yet traditional techniques for teaching critical thinking "rarely contribute" to "learning outcomes" (Lizzio & Wilson, 2007, p. 278) and may be ineffective (Barbuto, 2000; Burbach et al., 2004; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007; Paul, 2005). Unfortunately, some studies indicated that undergraduate students cannot effectively use critical thinking and graduate deficient in critical thinking ability (Burbach, Matkin, & Fritz, 2004; Flores, et al., 2012; Paul, 2005). As a result, more research is needed to understand how critical thinking can be applied to leadership teaching (Jenkins & Cutchens, 2011).

How comics might address or improve critical thinking and leadership is not well known, but comics offer specific traits that may be of use for educators who want to address leadership and critical thinking concerns. For example, fiction is seen as being beneficial for leadership learning (Fraiberg, 2010; Badarraco, 2006); and the comics medium is theorized to improve reader critical

thinking (Rapp, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the role of critical thinking in reader perceptions of leadership in comics and to make recommendations for the use of comics in the classroom for critical thinking improvement and engagement. Qualitative interviews with readers of *The Walking Dead* were conducted using grounded theory to determine the process readers use to perceive leadership in *The Walking Dead*. Semistructured interviews were analyzed for the presence of critical thinking using Facione et al.'s (1995) definition of critical thinking dispositions. Data were collected through an online survey and email interviews with participants.

The use of critical thinking to perceive leadership had a dual purpose in this study. First, research suggests that leadership and critical thinking are needed, yet lacking, skills in college graduates. Thus, the researcher could explore how comics may be useful for both of these deficient skills. Second, and more importantly, when exploring critical thinking in participants, the researcher needed each participant to address the same phenomenon. In this case, the application of a critical thinking process was used to perceive leadership, which aided in consistent rating of critical thinking because each participant was discussing leadership in his or her interview responses.

### **Comics in the Classroom for Critical Thinking: A Review and Rationale**

Comics might not be the first avenue people think of when considering ways to improve critical thinking for the purpose of leadership learning for college students. Ndalianis (2011) explained that in the 1950s, before popularization of comics as adult literature, comics were criticized for their adult content that corrupted youth culture. However, as American culture became more embracing of violence and sex in television, film, and video games, the content of comics became acceptable (Ndalianis, 2011). Yet, despite these changes in the comics industry, incorporating comics fully into the education world seems to be slow, most likely based on its perception of being a low form of popular culture media (Duncan & Smith, 2013; Ndalianis, 2011).

Many educators across all levels are increasingly recognizing the value of comics and other sequential art in the classroom. At the collegiate level, Short, Randolph-Seng, and Mckenny (2013) found that a graphic text approach, as opposed to a traditional textbook, encouraged readers to engage in a storyline, assess the situation, and update their evaluations all while considering content. Gavigan (2010) found that graphic novel reading for a group of academically struggling eighth grade students increased their motivation to read. Dallacqua (2012) studied a group of fifth grade students and concluded that visual information from the graphic novels strengthened the students' understanding of literary devices such as point of view, themes, symbolism, allusions, morals, tone and mood, flashback, and foreshadowing. Cary (2004) stated that comics are useful in the multilingual classroom because beginning second language learners

rely on the visuals to help comprehend the story. Comics help readers increase logical predictions, or inference abilities, while reading because of the visual support. Visual support aids in comprehension, which eases prediction (Cary, 2004). The non-profit organization Reading With Pictures (2014), founded in 2009, seeks to “promote literacy and improve educational outcomes for all students” with the use of comic books in the classroom. Comic Books Classroom, a Colorado based non-profit organization, provides free comic book curriculum to help improve literacy, art skills, student achievement, and personal awareness. Comicsclassroom, a Wikispace site, offers numerous resources and educational material for individuals interested in the use of comics for learning purposes.

The growing use of comics in education helps to form a foundation of why comics might be considered for critical thinking improvement. However, it is also important to understand how literature and storytelling affect critical thinking specifically for leadership perceptions. Sidney (1583/2009) considered poetry (or literature) as a social function that, with its emotional appeal, caused praxis rather than gnosis. Poetry, Sidney theorized, “was more successful than other disciplines, especially history and philosophy, in leading man to virtue” (Kinney, 1988, pp. 50–51). The ability of literature to lead to leadership awareness, as a virtue, is discussed by Badaracco (2006), who determined that fiction can serve as case studies to enable learners to raise critical questions in personal terms. Badaracco concluded that raising critical questions enables business executives to reflect on themselves as leaders. He argued that fiction can be treated as case studies and examined in depth as a means to learn about oneself and leadership. In addition, Fraiberg (2010) suggested that fiction adds to leadership development through its ability to embrace the impossible and to confront the idea that not all problems end with an answer.

Comics involve reader critical thinking because of the sequential visual and verbal nature of the medium. May (2012) called this phenomenon “engaging and powerful because [the reader has] invested [his or her] own intelligence and imagination and emotion” (para. 18). McCloud (1993) stated that comics are a medium that makes the audience a “willing and conscious collaborator,” which differs from other media because the reader mentally constructs the story presented in a comic book’s panels and gutters (p. 65). Readers are forced to find “meaning and resonance” between the juxtaposed panels (McCloud, 1993, p. 73). Furthermore, Cohn (2012) stated that readers not only infer between panels but also within the panels. For example, comics writers and illustrators might create a panel with a star containing the word “Pow” inside of it to signify the action of a hit or punch. Readers do not see the hit occur but they infer meaning based on the visual and verbal information presented within the panel (Cohn, 2012). Therefore, comics, as a sequential verbal and visual form, involve the reader differently than verbal-only texts. Beyond just the delivery of comics, Rapp (2011) stated that

reader interaction between a comics adaption and the same story in other media (film or literature) encourages readers to review multiple sources on a topic, an important step in any research or methodology process.

### **Rethinking Critical Thinking Pedagogy**

The educational properties of comics present several advantageous qualities for perceiving, and perhaps improving, critical thinking. These advantages may be useful for considering current techniques in addressing critical thinking in higher education, which many scholars believe is ineffective at producing good critical thinkers (Barbuto, 2000; Burbach et al., 2004; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007; Paul, 2005). Flores et al. (2012) explained traditional critical thinking teaching as a method of focusing on memorization and an increased knowledge base; whereas methods that are more fitting to a 21st century society should focus on perspectives and objective possibilities. Peters (2007) suggested a similar criticism that traditional instruction rarely leads to critical thinking but is instead a “learning how to learn” ideal that does not focus on both style *and* kinds of thinking and reasoning (p. 352). Flores et al. (2012) suggested the educational system needs to re-evaluate current critical thinking curricula to engage students emotionally. Therefore, they recommended that critical thinking teaching should be implemented in courses outside of just critical-thinking-specific courses. Flores et al. suggested that critical thinking learning may need to include a communal ideal, where learning and teaching is implied as a “collective phenomenon,” not an individual process (p. 226). Critical thinking teaching approaches that consider communal and collective processes may be more fitting to the multimodal forms of communication that are present in the lives of students in the 21st century.

The National Educational Association considers critical thinking as one of the “Four Cs” in preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, placing importance on technology and student ability to learn in a meaningful context. Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) state that educators should consider literacy that is present in the lives of students, including multimodal literacy. The use of multimodal texts helps address the New Literacy Studies theoretical framework, which views literacy “as a range of social practices affected by social factors” (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006, p. 42). Karchmer-Klein and Harlow Shinas (2012) stated that a problem with teaching multimodal texts is understanding how to place them in the K-12 environment; regardless, they stated, “In a multimodal text or space, modes cannot be interpreted individually, but, rather they must read a connected unit” (p. 61). Kress (2010) defined multimodality as a combination of words and images. Comics, as a combination of words and images that must be read as unit, are a multimodal form of reading. However, student critical thinking levels cannot be completely determined by pedagogy and instruction. For example, Arum and Roska (2010) followed 2,322 college students and determined that students spend more time socializing or in extracurricular activities than

pursuing academics. Thus, although improvement in critical thinking may be needed, the cause of low critical thinking in students cannot be attributed to solely inefficient pedagogy and teaching. Yet, at the least, a consideration of methods that use comics may help address the need to include multimodal communication forms. As Yang (2008) discussed, comics bridge the gap between the media students watch and the media they read. In addition, Duncan and Smith (2013) stated that the increase in comics use in academics addresses the need to teach different literacies that correspond with the multimodal culture of today's world, a culture that uses "textual, visual, and aural stimuli simultaneously to communicate its message" (p. 279).

### **Definitions**

Facione et al.'s (1995) comprehensive model based on seven critical thinking dispositions was used to analyze participant responses for critical thinking. Facione et al. concluded that critical thinking is achieved when linking six critical thinking skills to the seven dispositions. Facione et al.'s critical thinking model was used to define critical thinking throughout this study. This study used Facione et al.'s dispositions when analyzing data because critical thinking skills "and dispositions are mutually reinforced" and "a strong overall disposition toward [critical thinking] is integral to insuring the use of [critical thinking] skills outside the narrow instructional setting" (Facione et al., 1995, p. 3). This study sought to understand how the use of critical thinking when perceiving leadership in comics might transfer to the use of critical thinking in areas of life that transcend comics; therefore, analyzing the dispositions, rather than the skills, allowed for a broader understanding of critical thinking outside the narrow setting of the study.

The distinction of comics-specific terms is also important for this study. The term graphic novel is increasingly used to refer to comic books, particularly comic books seeking to distance themselves from the juvenile history and misrepresentation of the genre (Duncan & Smith, 2013). Typically, the term comic book is used for an on-going, monthly or periodically published 20–25-page issue. Graphic novels are, in essence, still comic books, although the term is often used for a limited series or story arc collected in one large book. For instance, *The Walking Dead* is published in monthly pamphlets and in volumes that collect multiple monthly issues. The appearance of these volumes physically resembles the more traditional form of the novel, and major bookstores often refer to their comic books section as the *graphic novels* section, even referring to nonfiction comics and scholarly studies of comics as graphic novels. However, as a monthly publication, *The Walking Dead* is a trade paperback. These monthly trade paperbacks are collected in editions, but the original form of the publication is month-to-month, which is distinguishable from a typical graphic novel that is one long-form story. Thus, despite the fact that graphic novels and comic books

have become interchangeable terms, there are differences in the publication type. For clarity, this study used the term *comics* and *sequential art* to refer to the medium. *Comic books* refer to monthly issued comics, including trade paperbacks, and *graphic novels* refers to story arcs collected in one volume.

### **Leadership in *The Walking Dead* comics**

In addition to having clear issues of leadership, *The Walking Dead* illustrates three aspects needed to conduct a study on the use of critical thinking when perceiving leadership: (a) the advantages of narrative fiction; (b) the visual and verbal delivery of a story; and (c) the entertainment advantages of popular culture comics, all of which are important when considered critical thinking teaching methods that interact with a multimodal format. *The Walking Dead* was, at the time of this research, a current popular comic book with a current popular television adaptation; as a result, readers may interact with social discussions of the storyline in addition to their personal reading and reactions. In addition, the popular nature of *The Walking Dead* makes the readers not only representative of comic book readers, but also of popular culture entertainment. When looking at how comics can be used in the college classroom, it is important to understand their relevance to students' lives and interests. Furthermore, the large readership of *The Walking Dead* increased the chances of receiving the ideal 20–30 participants for interviewing and increased the odds of receiving participants who did not read comics other than *The Walking Dead*.

*The Walking Dead* story and plot provided leadership issues needed for a study researching leadership perspectives. *The Walking Dead* is about a group of zombie apocalypse survivors who discover that life is about more than just surviving day to day; it is also about keeping family and loved ones as safe as possible when balancing social dynamics. The comics' characters learn to live in a world filled with deadly zombies; however, throughout the series, they learn that new, complicated issues of group behavior and survival outrank the zombies in terms of danger.

In extreme situations (like a zombie apocalypse) social norms do not apply because the situation has never occurred previously. There are no “standards of behavior that are shared” in group situations that have never been experienced (Robbins & Judge, 2010, p. 116). Extreme circumstances confuse roles in identity, perception, exceptions, and conflict (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Roles are “expected behavior patterns” but the characters do not have past experiences with a zombie apocalypse; therefore, there is no pattern to reflect upon. When patterns of expected behavior do not exist already, groups must reform and relearn the five-stage model of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Robbins & Judge, 2010). Thus, behavior continues to evolve in a group situation.

The evolution of behavior that contradicts established personality, values, and morals, is portrayed, for example, in Issue #17 of *The Walking Dead* when

Rick, the story's protagonist, decides to hang Thomas after discovering he murdered Rachel and Susie Greene. Rick declares the rule, "You Kill. You Die" to the group. However, in Issue #24, Rick realizes that the world has changed and rescue is not coming. He recognizes that change is needed and rules need to evolve to their surroundings. Rick changes his rules and tells the group, "You Kill. You Live." Rick, in Issue #24, determines the group must adapt to survive. He declared, "I will do whatever I have to do to keep us safe. Whatever it is—I will do it."

When leaders do not have the ability to pick members of fellowship, but rather simply get what they come across, the group becomes "a product of circumstance more than design" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p. 21). Rick Grimes sweats the stock qualities of leadership: aggressiveness, physical stamina, decisiveness, charisma, and loyalty. His confidence in making decisions and acting personally on them attracted other survivors to follow him. The group then simply becomes the "survivors," their commonality being they are alive. All other past social identities are erased because the most important of all human qualities is that of being alive; everything else is simply a result of life. Rick often puts himself in harm's way for the betterment of the group, which, despite negative qualities, offers a better choice in comparison to other leader characters. For example, in Issue #118, Maggie, a long-time member of Rick's group, approached a group of survivors and said, "If you follow Gregory's lead...you'll be beholden to [Negan] forever!" Words such as lead, leader, and follow are often used in *The Walking Dead*.

A brief review of the group dynamics and leadership in *The Walking Dead* is important when considering the educational properties of reading fiction. Johnson (2011) stated that fictional leaders can teach readers about leadership. The characters of *The Walking Dead* can serve as moral exemplars as readers evaluate actions of the characters for ethical behavior and decision making ability. As a result, the leadership decisions from the comics offer readers exemplars for leadership learning within fictional context.

### **Methodology and Design**

Before implementing comic books into the classroom for the purpose of engaging critical thinking when perceiving leadership, the researcher first needed to explore how, or if, comic book readers use critical thinking to perceive leadership. Creswell (2013) stated that a qualitative design allows a researcher to focus on participant views rather than perceived notions of the researcher. A grounded theory study was selected because of the study's intent to "move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory" (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). In addition, grounded theory studies seek to form a theory about an action or process on a research problem that does not have a current theory or explanation (Creswell, 2013). This study sought to form a theory about how readers perceive



leadership in *The Walking Dead* and to understand the role of critical thinking in those perceptions. Currently, there are few, if any, theories to explain this process for any comic book. Conclusions from grounded theory studies can be used in future studies, and this study sought to make potential recommendations for using comic books in the classroom to improve student critical thinking when perceiving leadership.

First, the study used an online survey to hook participants into email interviews. Two open-ended questions, “How do you value comic books for learning experiences?” and “What is a specific example of leadership in *The Walking Dead*?” provided a base for understanding how readers value comics for learning experiences and what leadership examples they determined in the comic books. The survey worked as a “hook” because survey participants were asked to include an email address if they were interested in participating in email interviews. Thus, the interview participants were all first survey participants.

Invitations to participate in the survey were emailed to a comics scholars listserv and 56 comic book retailers across the United States. In addition, the researcher created a Twitter account and actively invited individuals who were discussing *The Walking Dead* comic books. The survey invitation was posted on three different Facebook *The Walking Dead* comic fan groups, and on several open posts on *The Walking Dead* and *Skybound* Facebook pages. The survey invitation was also shared on three different website forums discussing *The Walking Dead*.

After reviewing the online surveys, the researcher started email interviews. The following questions served as the three structured questions of the email interviews:

- (1) What is your process for determining leadership in *The Walking Dead*? Please be as specific as possible.
- (2) How does the visual and verbal delivery of comic books affect your ability to perceive leadership within *The Walking Dead*? Please be as specific as possible.
- (3) What are other issues, thoughts, or ideas that you would like to mention concerning your perceptions of leadership within comic books?

The structured email interview questions served as the main contributor for the grounded theory analysis of participant processes for perceiving leadership and the role of critical thinking in these perceptions. However, because the study used semistructured qualitative interviewing, additional questions were asked based on participant online survey responses and additional information offered in subsequent email correspondence. For example, the online survey asked participants about experience and education in (a) comics studies, (b) leadership studies, and (c) critical thinking studies. Thus, additional interview questions were asked to explore more about these experiences and education. All interviews used

in analysis included participant responses to the structured email interview questions; however, each interview was different depending on the participant responses.

An online, email interview process using structured questions kept the researcher in the background while still interacting with the participants in an individualized manner based on their responses. Semistructured interviewing allowed the researcher to avoid leading participants into responses about their critical thinking process while still maintaining a structure to analyze responses with a Straussian grounded theory approach. Jones and Alony (2011) stated that Straussian grounded theory, as opposed to Glaserian grounded theory, uses structure to lead to a “more forced emergence of a theory” (p. 99), which is why the researcher chose to analyze data using a preconceived notion of critical thinking based on Facione et al.’s (1995) critical thinking dispositions. Using email interviews to collect data, rather than face-to-face interviews or focus groups, allowed the researcher to practice bracketing. The researcher wanted to bracket personal bias of using comics to perceive leadership, and the email interviews allowed for a semistructured environment for interviewing that focused on structured questions and the responses of the participants. Furthermore, the online survey and emailed interviews employed one of three Internet-based qualitative researcher methods described by Meho (2006). The asynchronous interview method was chosen over the synchronous method because interviews were not collected from participants in a group setting or at the same time. The appeal of an online survey and email interviews was that it allowed participants to respond to questions at their own pace without influence from other participant responses.

#### **Data Analysis: Online Survey**

The online survey collected responses from 177 participants; 69 of those participants provided acceptable short answers to the two open-ended survey questions. Males accounted for 58 (84%) of participants, 32 (43%) of total participants were 19–29 years old, 23 (33%) were 30–39 years old, 8 (11%) were 40–49 years old, and 5 (7%) were 50 years or older. A majority of participants (74%) considered themselves comic book readers; however, only 26% of participants indicated they had experience and/or education in comics studies. A slight majority of participants (55%) indicated they had education and/or experience in critical thinking studies, and 35% indicated they had experience or education in leadership studies.

The researcher first analyzed participant responses to the question “How do you value comics for learning experiences? Please be as specific as possible.” The majority of participants (85%) indicated a value of comics for learning experiences as listed in Table 1; these categories were then analyzed and placed into themes based on Bloom’s (1956) three domains for learning: cognitive,

affective, and psychomotor. For the purpose of assigning themes to the categories, cognitive learning was defined as intellectual abilities and skills (Bloom, 1956); affective learning was defined as the development of attitudes and behavior, rather than intellectual ability (Rovai, Wighting, Baker, & Grooms, 2008) and the presence of motivation to learn (Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996); and psychomotor learning was defined as the manual tasks and movements of the body (Rovai et al., 2008). The placement of the categories into these themes helped to determine the possible use of comics in the classroom, which was an underlining purpose of the study. Categories of the values of comics for learning experiences were placed in one of the three domains of learning. Table 1 lists the categories, the number of times the category was mentioned by participants, and the domain of learning determined from each category. The researcher practiced co-occurring coding because many participants ( $n = 26$ ) listed more than one category. Two participants were confused by the question, one participant did not respond, and two participants stated the value “depends.”

Table 1  
*Online Participants' Value of Comics as a Learning Experience*

Value of Comics as a Learning Experience	Times Mentioned	Learning Theme
Teaching life lessons	28	Affective
Cognitive abilities	14	Cognitive
Learning to read/Reading motivation	13	Affective
Entertainment	12	Affective
Involving imagination	10	Cognitive
Same value as all other literature	7	N/A
Visual literacy	6	Cognitive
Inconclusive reason, but valued	6	N/A
Not valued	5	None
Art appreciation	3	Affective
Learning vocabulary	3	Cognitive
Inconclusive reason:		N/A
depends on the reader and comic	2	
Inconclusive: confused by the question	2	N/A
No response	1	N/A

The second open-ended survey question asked participants to list a specific example of leadership in *The Walking Dead* and explain why they see this as leadership. Again, 69 represented the total number of participant responses analyzed. The eight most frequently mentioned categories are listed in Table 2 along with the number of times each category was mentioned in association with Rick, the most frequently mentioned leadership character.

Table 2  
*Qualities of Leadership in The Walking Dead*

Quality of Leadership	Frequently of the Quality as Mentioned in Participant Responses	Number of Times Quality Mentioned in Association with Rick
Protecting others	30	22
Making decisions	23	20
Totalitarian/Authoritative	12	4
Taking control	10	9
Motivating/Inspiring	9	9
Fallible/Imperfect	8	8
Accepting responsibilities/consequences	7	6
Reluctant/Unconfident	6	6

### Data Analysis: Email Interviews

Twenty-two survey participants also participated in email interviews. A majority of the participants were males ( $n = 20$ ) and had some college education: graduate degree ( $n = 8$ ), bachelor's degree ( $n = 6$ ), and some college ( $n = 6$ ). Most participants had experience and/or education with critical thinking ( $n = 14$ ), and slightly above half ( $n = 12$ ) had comics studies education/experience. Few participants indicated education and/or experience in leadership studies ( $n = 6$ ). Only one participant indicated he did not consider himself a comic book reader. Perceptions of leadership for email participants were similar to perceptions determined from survey participants, although the most frequently listed leadership qualities were different. Email participants most frequently listed the individual who (a) makes decisions, (b) is imperfect/fallible, (c) takes control, and (c) protects others.

Using the process of memoing, the researcher reviewed interviews to look for issues that contributed to participant perceptions of leadership. The central

theme in the participant process to perceive leadership was determining character attributes that embodied leadership in their opinions. In short, in explaining their process for determining leadership in *The Walking Dead*, participants first determined who is leading then explained leadership qualities of the leader and/or leaders. The who is leading theme was mentioned in all participant interviews and inferred to be the primary influence for 19 of the 22 participants. Other themes were influential, but not universally central. Thus, the key theme in perceiving leadership for the participants was to first simply look at qualities of the characters that they considered being leadership qualities.

The researcher then determined what factors influenced the leadership qualities the participants determined. After establishing this central theme, the researcher used three-phrase coding, which determines themes and issues and their relationship to each other. Overall, many potential causal factors may exist, but were not identified by participants in interviews. Figure 1 placed the themes in proximately to the central theme (who is leading) based on their weight of influence. Table 3 shows examples of participant responses that were associated with the seven themes.

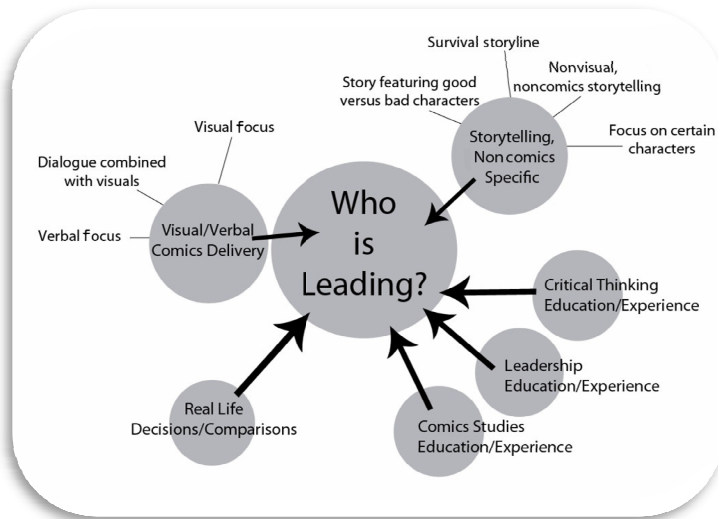


Figure 1. Perceiving leadership in comics theoretical model

Table 3  
Seven Influences of Reader Perceptions of Leadership

Themes	Sample of Participant Responses
Identifying who is leading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “Who the other characters willingly follow.”</li> <li>· “Making leadership decisions at the times they need to be made.”</li> </ul>
Visual/Verbal comics delivery  (a) Dialogue combined with visuals (b) Visual focus (c) Verbal focus	(a) · “[Leadership] is sort of who has the most screen time and words...Rick is on the page way more often than any other characters, and when there’s long exposition, it’s Rick.”  (b) · Because of the “black and white” delivery “the reader focuses more on the interactions of the characters, and therefore, the leadership of Rick and others.”  (c) · “[Rick’s] word balloons are always more exaggerating and highlighted when he is ‘leading.’”
Storytelling, noncomics specific  (a) Survival storyline (b) Non-visual, noncomic storytelling (c) A focus on certain characters (main characters/focal characters in the story) (d) A story featuring good versus bad characters	(a) · “[Leadership] is about survival. The actions of the leader keep the group, the majority of the group, alive.”  (b) · “Storytelling is storytelling...holds your attention and keeps you coming back, good art, ugly art, no art...whatever.”  (c) · “We believe Rick is the strongest leader only because we have the most experience with him...”  (d) · “[A] hero has a villain, and with that comes decisions to be made.”
Critical thinking experience/education	· “Allows me to see the characters in a different light.”
Comics studies experience/education	· “Being a comics scholar has provided me insight into how the medium (of comics) allows conveyance of meaning beyond the written word.”
Leadership experience/education	· “I do think my experiences help me to see leaders more clearly in any situation including [The Walking Dead]. I’ve seen every form of leadership from fear based to the more lenient and gentle type.”
Real life decisions/comparisons	· “I often find myself comparing myself to the characters or even what I would do in the situation.”

Once establishing the interactions and influences of participant perceptions of leadership in *The Walking Dead* using grounded theory research, interviews were analyzed for the role of critical thinking. Interviews were reviewed again and coded for each of the seven critical thinking dispositions as determined by Facione et al.'s (1995). After reviewing for the presence of the seven dispositions, the participants were coded using ratings of their dispositions as strong, acceptable, or weak. A rubric of the ratings and the corresponding dispositions (Table 4) was used to rate the participants' dispositions consistently.

Table 4  
Measuring Critical Thinking Disposition Rubric

	Strong	Acceptable	Weak
<i>Systematic</i>	Participant stated they <b>had a means</b> (not necessarily a process) to identify leadership and directly <b>explained it and its relevance</b> to their leadership perceptions.	Participant stated they <b>had a means</b> to identify leadership <b>but did not connect or explain</b> this means to their perceptions of leadership.	Participant <b>did not directly state their means</b> to identify leadership, but simply stated examples of leadership or defined leadership
<i>Analytical</i>	Participant <b>described leadership in specific, complex terms</b> , i.e. giving examples of action(s), and describing the context of the leadership in the action(s).	Participant <b>described leadership in basic terms</b> , giving basic examples and description of context and/or action(s).	<b>Participant did not describe</b> leadership or describe examples of context and/action.
<i>Inquisitive</i>	The participant <b>exhibited excitement</b> to discuss leadership in the comic and <b>extended the conversation</b> by offering additional insights beyond the posed interview questions. Participant also specifically indicated that comics are valued for learning experiences.	Participant <b>exhibited excitement</b> and extended the discussion about leadership in a <b>minimal</b> fashion. Participant valued comics as a learning experience, but not specifically.	Participant <b>did not extend the conversation</b> about leadership in the comic but rather simply and nonspecifically answered the questions. Participant did not value comics as a learning experience.
<i>Judicious</i>	Participant <b>drew conclusions</b> about the leadership of the character(s) by clearly comparing to real life leaders, other comics, or other leaders within the comic book by <b>showing extensive evidence, context, and standards</b> .	Participant <b>drew conclusions</b> about the leadership of the characters with <b>minimal comparison</b> to real life leaders or other characters within the comics. Participant showed <b>minimal evidence, context, and standards</b> .	Participant <b>did not consider more than one option of leadership</b> and <b>did not compare leadership</b> of the characters or to real life leaders with evidence, context, or standards.
<i>Truthseeking</i>	Participant was <b>objective</b> about leadership examples and definitions and	Participant was <b>minimally objective</b> about leadership examples and	Participant was <b>not objective</b> about leadership examples and definitions and



	<b>showed evaluation</b> of multiple leadership styles.	definition and showed a <b>minimal amount of evaluations</b> of multiple leadership styles.	<b>did not show evaluation</b> of multiple leadership styles.
<i>Confidence in Reasoning</i>	Participant <b>clearly and specifically explained</b> how their perceptions of leadership exemplified leadership; for example, “This is leadership because...” or “Leadership is...” or “I define leadership as...”	Participant <b>explained</b> how their perceptions of leadership exemplified leadership, <b>but not specifically</b> .	Participant <b>did not explain</b> how their perceptions of leadership exemplified leadership.
<i>Open-minded</i>	Participant <b>showed potential bias</b> about perceptions of leadership as influenced by the story’s content or personal preference, such as admitting successful leadership depends on the context and strengths of the leader, or that leadership perceptions are in part influenced by the writer/artist.	Participant <b>inferred potential bias</b> about perceptions of leadership, but <b>did not directly explain</b> how the story’s content, personal experiences, or the writer/artist may have influenced perceptions of leadership.	Participant <b>did not show or discuss any potential for bias</b> in their leadership perceptions.

After rating each disposition for each participant, the ratings were reviewed and compared to ensure continuity of the assigned ratings. The researcher then made a chart of sample participant responses for the strong rating for all seven dispositions (Table 5). Interviews were reviewed again to check for consistency in the ratings. The sample statements offered a foundation to ensure consistency in rating, but participant ratings were not solely made based on single statements, but multiple statements throughout the interview that related to the seven disposition areas. The sample of responses in Table 5 offered a small snapshot of participant exemplification in each area, but these statements did not represent the sole existence of the disposition within responses. Although participants did not have a process for perceiving leadership, the systematic disposition was rated based on participant clarity in explaining how they determined leadership. For instance, a participant who was rated as “strong,” stated, “I wouldn’t say that I have an overt method of determining leadership...rather...I use a heuristic or schema of what a leader is or how a leader should act and compare a given character to that leadership heuristic or schema.” Although there was not a process, the participant directly stated how he identifies leadership.

Table 5  
Sample Participant Responses for “Strong” Disposition Ratings

Systematic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I wouldn’t say that I have an overt method of determining leadership...rather, I would say that I use a heuristic or schema of what a leader is or how a leader should act and compare a given character to that leadership heuristic or schema.”</li> </ul>
Analytical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Rick is striving to be a leader of a community/team instead of a group...groups and teams provide a basis for family, protection, waging war, government, and work...Rick has seen that Negan can destroy all the work the communities have put into their survival.”</li> </ul>
Inquisitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[M]aybe the better questions to ask would be ‘What process do the characters in the comics take to determine leadership?’ In the comic I feel Rick takes on the leadership role given that he was law enforcement prior to the apocalypse.</li> </ul>
Judicious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The better writing [in today’s comics] has lead to much better characters and, therefore, better leaders. It is no longer just enough to beat up the main villain but show the decision making that the leaders must go through in order to defeat the villains and it is not always by using their fist.”</li> </ul>
Truthseeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Leadership is a complex psychological construct and comic books have a tendency to simplify it into a pep talk, theme, or first punch. Robert Kirkman (the writer) wants us to believe that Rick is just a natural leader, but I believe that a better example of true leadership is from the character that only actively seeks it out, but also activity hold it.”</li> </ul>
Confidence in Reasoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I define leadership in the comics as a large number of people, more than four, using a single or group thinking to remain alive. Leadership is the comic isn’t about advancement, it’s about survival. The actions of the leader keep the group, the majority of the group, alive.”</li> </ul>
Open-minded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “[Rick] being the leader is kind of a thing of convenience from a writing standpoint on Kirkman (the writer)...we see the comic through Rick as the actor with complete agency that occasionally falters to keep the narrative interesting.”</li> </ul>

After coding participant interviews for disposition ratings, the researcher reviewed the length of each interview to determine whether interview response length correlated with ratings. The email interviewing depended on participants responding to subsequent questions from the researcher. The researcher wanted to ensure that the ratings of the dispositions were not highly influenced simply by the length of response (i.e., participants may have a greater disposition but because of the short responses or lack of participation, this disposition was not evident). A trend existed between the length of the interview and the average disposition score, but there was no significance to the relationship ( $r = .542$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ). This suggests that the scores were not highly influenced by the amount of the words used in participant response.

The researcher compared information to determine whether education level, comics studies experience/education, leadership experience/education, or critical thinking experience/education correlated with disposition scores. An education setting would not likely have students with extensive education or experience in this areas, so the researcher wanted to determine if these factors affected critical thinking for this study's participants. A trend existed between education level and disposition score, but there was no significance to the relationship ( $r = .423$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ). Overall, no relationship existed between disposition scores and critical thinking ( $r = .326$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ), leadership ( $r = .011$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ), or comics studies ( $r = .161$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ) experience/education. Likewise, no relationship existed between participant critical thinking disposition scores and the amount of comic books they read on a monthly basis ( $r = .126$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .360$ ). Overall, this suggests that a variety of comic readers use critical thinking, regardless of education.

Overall, participants showed critical thinking dispositions, albeit at varying degree. Although participants were aware of the purpose of the study, they were not directly asked about their use of critical thinking. The presence of critical thinking disposition across all participants, regardless of interview length or participant education/experience, suggests that comic book readers use critical thinking when perceiving leadership in comics.

### **Results and Discussion**

This study determined that readers from a variety of educational backgrounds use critical thinking to perceive leadership in comics. In addition, participants, regarding of educational background, find a learning value for comics, and they determine similar leadership even when they have no contact with each other. The results of this study suggest comics can be used in the classroom to engage with reader critical thinking and to identify particular leadership styles. Table 6 addresses four of the key findings and implications determined from this research.

Table 6  
*Study Findings and Implications Summary*

Findings	Implication of Findings
<p>1. Comics readers value comics for learning experiences in a variety of ways, most frequently affective learning. Most frequent specific learning values included teaching life lessons, involving cognitive abilities, and learning to read/reading motivation.</p>	<p>Comics are more than just entertaining pieces of literature. Affective and cognitive learning are perceived advantages. Use of comics in the classroom can interact and perhaps improve student affective and cognitive learning, most specifically issues of life lessons (human behavior, survival, morals), cognitive abilities (critical thinking, problem solving, and analysis), and learning to read/reading motivation.</p>
<p>2. Comics readers from the email interviews most frequently identified leadership in <i>The Walking Dead</i> as making decisions, protecting others, taking control, and being imperfect/fallible.</p>	<p>When asked, readers easily determine specific types of leadership in comics. Comics can be useful for leadership understanding. Identifying leadership in comics characters may help improve the ability of students to perceive and identify good or bad leadership in life. In addition, this study implies that the use fiction as leadership case studies should not be limited to only verbal fiction.</p>
<p>3. Readers did not have a process for determining leadership, but the central phenomenon for readers was to determine who is leading, which was influenced, in order of importance, by the comics visual/verbal delivery; the noncomics specific storytelling; previous education/experience in critical thinking, leadership studies, and comics studies; and real life decisions/comparisons.</p>	<p>Many influences exist when readers perceive leadership in comics. Comics can serve as practice in how to perceive leadership correctly and advantageously in a student's life. Understanding the influence of perceiving leadership in comics may help students understand the influences of perceiving leadership in life, such as depictions of leaders in the media and how one's own education and knowledge influences leadership perceptions.</p>
<p>4. Readers determine perceptions of leadership in comics using critical thinking.</p>	<p>Comics interact with reader critical thinking, even when readers aren't directly asked to consider critical thinking. Reading comics may improve student ability to use the critical thinking process outside of reading comics, perhaps most notably when perceiving leadership. Using comics in the classroom may help improve deficient critical thinking skills in college students while also exploring new methods of teaching critical thinking that some researchers consider to be insufficient.</p>

Educators interested in using comics in their classrooms could conduct additional research to see if the findings apply to their students, particularly to students who might not typically read comics. The participants of this study were comic books readers, and more research would need to be conducted to determine if non-comic book readers use similar critical thinking when perceiving leadership in comics. This study was not able to determine whether the role of critical thinking in perceiving leadership in comics would be different than the role of critical thinking when perceiving leadership in verbal-only fiction. The type of leadership in *The Walking Dead* would not be the same for all other comics; thus, influences to perceive leadership may not be the same while reading other comics. In addition, the semistructured interview questions may have lead participants into responses. Future studies would need to repeat this research in a classroom environment to determine if similar results would occur after reading other comics. Furthermore, a less structured interview process could be used to understand how the process and use of critical thinking may differ for different readers reading different comics.

A suggestion would be to have students read verbal-only fiction and a comics story to compare critical thinking scores. For example, *The Walking Dead* comics could be paired with a verbal-only story of a similar genre and content, perhaps Cormac McCarthy's (2006) *The Road*. Educators would need to consider appropriate content for the educational level; *The Walking Dead* might not be well suited for a high school environment. In addition to critical thinking involvement, comics could also be used for leadership understanding. Because this study determined readers identify similar leadership styles (regardless of not having contact with each other), educators teaching leadership could choose comics as a mean to discuss leadership. For example, Johnson's (2011) definition for the leadership style of utilitarianism is "attempting to do the greatest good for the great number of people," in which, at times, doing the greatest good can be confused with personal, selfish interest (pp. 154-156). An example of the ethical perspective of utilitarianism can be found in the character Ozymandias, from Moore and Gibbon's (1986–1987/2005) graphic novel *Watchmen*, who staged a major disaster that killed millions in order to force world peace, and, in his view, saving humanity from nuclear war. The graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1988–1989/2005) depicted an anarchist committing terrorist actions against a government that is lying to its people, preventing basic human rights, and covering up genocide. A reader of this graphic novel can view the leadership tactic of the protagonist, called "V," as having a Kantian categorical imperative: the need to do what he feels is right no matter the consequence.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to contribute to research on the growing use of comics and sequential art in education. Specifically, the study hoped to determine the role

of critical thinking in reader perceptions of leadership in comics. Despite the presence of comics in academics and popular culture, study of their potential use in the field of leadership and critical thinking is minimal. However, theories indicate that comic books and other graphic narratives involve a reader's critical thinking process (McCloud, 1993; Rapp, 2011); furthermore, fiction is theorized to advantageously serve as case studies that involve leadership awareness (Badaracco, 2006; Fraiberg, 2010). The results suggest that a variety of readers value comics for learning experiences and are able to perceive leadership using critical thinking. The results of this study were concluded through the use of qualitative research using an online survey and email interviews. A grounded theory approach was used to determine a theory of how readers perceive leadership, and the level of critical thinking dispositions was analyzed using Facione et al.'s (1995) definition of seven disposition terms. Overall, the results of this study indicate that comics engage reader critical thinking and the have potential to be useful tools in an educational setting.

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