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X-Men Ethics: Using Comic Books to Teach Business Ethics

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ABSTRACT. A modern form of narrative, comic books are used to communicate, discuss, and critique issues in business ethics and social issues in management. A description of comic books as a legitimate medium is followed by a discussion of the pedagogical uses of comic books and assessment techniques. The strengths of the pedagogy include crossing cultural barriers, understanding the complexity of individual decision-making and organizational influences, and the universality of dilemmas and values. We provide an initial source for educators on the topics, comic books, plotlines, and other commentary for consideration of use in the classroom from high school to graduate business ethics and social issues in management courses.

KEY WORDS: comic books, graphic novels, multicultural, narrative, pedagogy, teaching

Introduction

Contemporary and engaging, comic books are a mature form of literature, tackling such topics as wide ranging from the September 11, 2001, attacks in *Amazing Spider-Man* #36 (Straczynski, 2001) to product safety and corporate greed in *Ghost Rider 1/2* (Grayson, 2001). This mature medium of storytelling is international and growing. We argue that comic books, also known as graphic novels, are a legitimate literary form for study and use in teaching business ethics and business-and-society topics in the classroom. Indeed, comic books can tackle business and society as an academic field: management scholar Professor Robert H. Hogner was immortalized in a Marvel Comics *Namorita* (an X-Men series) special edition (http://cba.fiu.edu/mgmt/rhogner/xmen.htm.) about his business-and-society course.

Comic books are a modern form of narrative and can be effective in teaching the complexities and social context of specific topics, from critiques of capitalism to faulty products or discrimination in the workplace. We provide specific examples of how comic books can be integrated into the classroom and assessment techniques. We then discuss specific examples for subjects such as business ethics, leadership, consumer rights, and environmental issues.

Comic books as narrative

As narratives originating in the 20th and 21st centuries, comic books are considered a legitimate art and literary form (Overstreet, 2005). Comic book writers and artists draw from their own creativity as well as folklore, religion, and culture. They develop their narrative in the context of their culture, reflecting the concerns, desires, and norms of the day. Comic books reflect the culture, but they also inform as many comic books provide information and expect their readers to stay current in world events and social issues; for example, a recent *Spider-Man* #36 (2001) addresses the September 11, 2001, attacks.

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Recently, scholars have discussed the advantages of using narratives in education and in the workplace to improve understanding of complex issues and context as well as to improve communication skills (Alvarez and Merchan, 1992; Berger, 1997; Blyler and Perkins, 1999; Griffith, 1999; Jameson, 2001; Kelly and Zak, 1999; Nash, 2000; Randels, 1998). Narratives and narrative analysis also have been used to address moral issues at work (Ford and Harding, 2003; Herman, 2002; Wornham, 2003). In their study of comic book characters as archetypes, Banks and Wein (1998) explore the use of traditional and contemporary folklore in comic books to communicate patterns of human experience, beliefs, and tradition. Several business and society scholars have addressed the use of literature, namely films, plays, and novels, in teaching management concepts, business and society, and business ethics (Berger and Pratt, 1998; Champoux, 2001; Garaventa, 1998; Gilbert, 1997; Kennedy and Lawton, 1992; McAdams, 1993; McAdams and Koppensteiner, 1992; Sarachek, 1995; Shepard et al., 1997). Comic books join books, plays, and film as literary forms that are also useful in a teaching context.

Representing contemporary cultures, comic books have been the source of many academic studies, especially in the field of popular culture and cultural studies (e.g., Brown, 1997; Edwardson, 2003; Lang and Trimble, 1988; Lovell, 2002; Park, 2002; Shaheen, 1994; Skidmore and Skidmore, 1983; Trunshell, 2004; Wolf-Meyer, 2003). University educators use comic books to teach science (Gesh and Weinberg, 2002; Kakalios, 2002, 2006), sociology (Hall and Lucal, 1999; Snyder, 1997; Sones, 1944), and consumerism (Belk, 1987).

Comic books reveal information about society in general, norms and expectations of social, political and economic institutions. While the stories may occur in the past, present, or various futures or realities, the tales are part of today's culture, reflecting problems and desires in the current world. Banks and Wein studied comic books as ''the functional equivalent of the folklores and myths of the past in the technological and commercialized world of today'' (1998, p. 1). The added power of graphics communicates as well: ''Comics require that the viewer *read* pictures, not look at them'' (emphasis added, Corliss, 2005, p. 102).

Comic books combine form and content through the written word and artwork to create a story or narrative, with the writers and artists working together. Although 'graphic novel' is perhaps the popular term these days in the United States (possibly to provide popular legitimacy), in this paper we use the general term 'comic books'. In Britain and other countries the term comic book does not imply something juvenile, so the term graphic novel is not as prevalent. In other countries the literary form is also known as histórias em quadrinhos (Brazil), manhua and liamhuanhua (China), bandes dessinées (France, Belgium), fumetti (Italy), manga (Japan), manhwa (Korea), and historietas (Mexico).

One of the more well-known comic books in academic circles is the graphic novel *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986; 1991), for which writer and illustrator Art Spiegelman received a Pulitzer Prize (Sturm, 2002). Sometimes classified as fiction and sometimes as nonfiction, *Maus* tells the story of Spiegelman's parents' struggle and survival in World War II. In the story, the Nazis were portrayed as cats and the Jews as mice. According to Yang, *Maus* brought the public's attention to ''a decades-long movement within the comics community towards artistically mature, literate work...comics had finally 'grown up'''' (2003, no page given).

Comic books are being used in classrooms from elementary schools to Yale University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). A sub-genre, superhero comic books, has been used for teaching a variety of subjects at the college level – sociology (Hall and Lucal, 1999), sociology of sports (Snyder, 1997), and physics (Feder, 2002).

The use of comics in general is not unique in addressing business issues. *The Wall Street Journal* runs a cartoon series titled *Pepper...and Salt*. A 50-year select collection of these business cartoons ''serves as a social history of how American business has changed over a half century – and how it has stayed the same'' (Preston, 1999, cover). *Dilbert* and *Doonesbury* have long been popular newspaper comic strips that satirize business in society. While the former is seen more as political satire, *Dilbert* is a satire of modern business life; Lockheed Martin even used Dilbert as the theme for an interactive ethics training game (Dyrud, 1998). Sold in general bookstores as well as specialized stores, comic books

are increasing in popularity (Miller, 2006) and fertile with contemporary storylines about business and society conflicts and ethical issues.

Benefits of comic books

The value of using comic books in the classroom can be discussed in terms of what the medium provides the student. Yang (2003) identifies five attributes of comic books that add to the learning experience: motivating, visual, permanent, intermediary, and popular. Based on the authors' experience, the popularity of comic books not only attracts and keeps the students' attention; it also bridges socio-economic, generational and cultural gaps.

Comic book creators have long acknowledged that they were teaching and motivating in addition to entertaining youth. For example, comic books about Metamorpho, the Element Man, detail the properties of the elements and practical applications (Byko, 2001). Indeed, comic books are also viewed as a way to improve vocabulary and comprehension for students of lower reading ability (Byko, 2001).

The reason most often given for their use is motivation for junior readers, but University of Minnesota Professor James Kakalios (Westrup, 2002) reports his college physics students prefer comic book problems to the oversimplified, out-of-context textbook problems. For example, it is more intriguing to determine the power and lift required for Superman to fly than calculations for the effect of friction on a moving block. In another example, what variable-strength laser does X-Man Cyclops need to pierce a steel container without damaging the contents?

Comic books appeal to peoples' feelings beyond the rational, objective meanings of the written words. Pictures and words combined can be powerful. The combination of words and picture ''literally 'put a human face' on a given subject'' (Versaci, 2001, p. 61). John Carlin, the curator of a comic book exhibition for the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, described the artistic element as ''visual languages'' (Corliss, 2005, p. 102).

The combination of art and dialogue reach out to students of different learning styles, notably the visual learner. Classroom instruction tended to focus on verbal learners, but since the 1980s researchers have focused on addressing the needs of visual learners through multi-media capabilities (Gardner, 1983). We believe there is pragmatic value to communicating information several different ways. The Dunn and Dunn learning style model (Dunn and Dunn, 1993) utilizes four modality preferences based on sensory methods of receiving and interpreting stimuli – visual, auditory/verbal, tactile, and kinesthetic. Early education studies showed that the additional visual component increases learning, and subsequent studies focused on the visual-verbal dimension of learning (Mayer and Massa, 2003). Comic books address both the visual and verbal learner and provide a tangible medium, which students can experience at their own pace.

A related and unique benefit of comic books is visual permanence, the communication of information with time and space being the same – time as spatial (Williams, 1995). In other words, instead of sequential time, the reader can engage the information at his/her own pace and, thus, control is in the hands of the student (McCloud, 1993). In this case the student has control over the speed with which communication progresses. Similar to reading a novel, but the comic books add a visual component.

Comic books also serve as an intermediary; students can address emotionally charged topics such as discrimination in the workplace in a unique environment, one removed from them. The comic world provides alternative universes in which alternative consequences can be explored. The use of a fantasy and unique human characters allows students to discuss such topics in removed, theoretical terms and then in specific applications or examples. For example, Hall and Lucal (1999) discuss using comic books in teaching sociology to examine elements of discrimination and social norms. The X-Men storylines allow readers to explore the concept of discrimination not among humans but between humans (*homo sapiens*) and mutant humans (*homo superior*). A classic us-versus-them conflict exists in another universe where students can explore the manifestations of discrimination without the attached emotional and political weight. For example, students can explore the denial of mutants' access to schooling, medical care, and political voice as well as identify the mechanisms used by business,

society, and government to rationalize such denial. Comic books can encourage critical thinking skills in analyzing either the story itself or the presentation of the material in such a literary (written and visual) form.

A final attribute of comic books is popularity, especially influential in the college environment; for example, the average reader is 24 years old (Duin, 2002). The estimated overall market for comic books in the U.S. for 2005 was $400–$450 million dollars (Miller, 2006; Steinberg, 2006). The popularity of comic books extends into other media such as successful movies based on comic books (*Batman, Batman Returns, Batman Begins, Blade I – III, Daredevil, Hellboy, Spider-Man 1 and 2, Superman 1-4, Superman Returns*, and *X-Men 1–3*) and television shows based on comic books (*Birds of Prey, Blade*, *The Incredible Hulk, Lois & Clark*, *Smallville*, *Witchblade*, and *Wonder Woman*). With U.S. domestic gross up to $205 million for *Batman Begins* (Miller, 2006), the year of 2005 was a big year for movies based on comic book characters and storylines: *Batman Begins*, *Fantastic Four*, *Sin City*, *Elektra*, and *Constantine*. In the U.S. the two dominant firms are Marvel and DC Comics, controlling about 37 and 33% of the market, respectively. While Marvel trades under Marvel Entertainment, DC Comics is part of Time Warner.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits for using popular comic books in class is that students are able to see that conflicts and ethics are universal – even if portrayed in different contexts. In a session with high school students, one of the authors used comic books as a way not only to illustrate dilemmas and the various ethical principles involved, but also as common ground or shared experience for the audience. Students from varied socio-economic backgrounds found common interests by discussing their favorite characters and how these characters approached ethical situations. Their discussions even bridged the gap in generations between the students and their teachers as they compared characters such as Blade, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Superman, and Wonder Woman. Across racial, economic, and age differences, the students and teachers can share common reference points. Bridging cultural gaps, international students in a university setting have brought in comic books from their home countries to show that similar themes are addressed, albeit in a way most fitting for that culture.

Pedagogical and assessment strategies

This pedagogy has been used in graduate, undergraduate, and high school settings with success in motivating students to see that the ethical dimensions of business ethics are ever-present and portrayed in a variety of media. At all three educational levels, references to comic books have been used in discussion to illustrate ethical dilemmas, cognitive development, ethical reasoning, and the complexity of social issues. For instance, superheroes illustrate the temptations of using their abilities for personal gain (where others may or may not benefit or even know) and using their abilities for the greater good; how these characters work through these pressures is more evocative and effective in showing that there is more to business ethics than deciding 'what should I do'. Indeed, roles, organizational pressures, political influences, and uncertainty highlight the complexity of the situation. Assessment strategies also vary based on the material, learning goals, and instructor, and several assessment activities are described below. More detailed information on topics and specific comic books is provided in the next section.

While comic books can be used throughout a course, effective use depends on the instructor and the students. While Professor Kakalios has made it an effective aspect of his undergraduate physics course (Feder, 2002; Westrup, 2002), the authors have used it only as part of a module or subsection of the course. It may be effective to use comic books in a specific unit of instruction when addressing the social issues in business and ethical dilemmas in other literature such as novels and film as well.

Integrating comic books into the classroom is also an opportunity for students to look for ethical dilemmas and concepts from the course in popular media. Many business ethics teachers already reference movies, TV shows, or novels in the classroom (Berger and Pratt, 1998; Champoux, 2006; Garaventa, 1998; Hosmer and Steneck, 1989; Shepard et al.; 1997; van Es, 2003); the comic book is another narrative or means for learning and communicating. In a graduate course, the students were able to relate course concepts to another universe in a comic book series (such as X-Men), demonstrating that they understood the universality of the concepts and could apply them in different contexts beyond their own experience.

The instructors can bring in examples or ask students for their previous knowledge of comic books. Another method to integrate comic books is to assign reading prior to class and require the students to discern relevant course concepts. The students can be assigned all of the same issue, issues within a comic book series, or they may be able to choose their own issue. One advantage of the latter is that students can access a variety of comic books, and it can be an opportunity to compare and contrasts the treatment of such themes as consumerism, wealth, and societal expectations of corporations over a broad spectrum. Through class discussion or shared papers, students also can see differing perspectives of the same 'story' and the richness of the problem as seen from other perspectives.

Students can take the role of various characters and suggest resolutions in oral or written form. In a high school setting, students discussed what various characters would do in response to a situation – given a particular organizational environment, what would Spider-Man do? What would Blade do and why? Students evaluated the decision-making framework of the superhero and the strength and precedence of certain virtues and argued about what each superhero would do and why. Another related discussion asked students to describe the superhero or comic book character with whom they self-identified. From an instructor's perspective, it was satisfying to see students from different background identify with the same major character and thus the students developed a bond between them for the rest of the class period (possibly beyond).

Still more involved is the use of comic books for students to identify an ethical dilemma or social issue and determine how to solve it. This could be criticism of the resolution presented in the comic book, suggestions for alternative resolutions, or an original resolution of the situation where the comic book stopped. Discussion of the resolution and implementation would necessarily entail recognition of stakeholders, ethical principles, the legal environment, and practical considerations.

In a professional educators' forum, the participants suggested using of comic books to promote creativity, expression, and moral imagination, even to the point of having students develop their own comic books to address an ethical dilemma. A similar endeavor is The Comic Book Project, an arts-based literacy project, directed at students in grades 5 through 8 in New York to develop writing and storytelling skills (see Bitz, 2004, for the mechanics and an evaluation). For a university population, emphasis can be on the illustrations of business-and-society concepts, stakeholder management, moral development, and ethical reasoning.

Another option for the instructor is to show parts or all of films based on comic books. There are benefits to using film as cited above, but direct comparison with comic books should be cautioned. In the making of the film, liberties often have been taken with the plotline and characters from the comic book series, for instance it may be more violent or less reflective.

For use in the classroom, instructors should consider contacting the comic book publishers for free copies; Marvel, DC Comics, and Dark Horse often provide free material to promote reading and especially reading of comic books. If not free, the comic books may be purchased at a reduced price and possibly kept by the instructor or school for repeated use. As far as copying and copyright issues for use in class, the requirements will depend on the number of copies required. See Hall and Lucal (1999) for mechanics of using comic books in the classroom. Ranging from minimal effort to maximum creativity, integrating comic books can involve using the characters as examples in a lecture or discussion, having students read comic books to identify or analyze course concepts, using comic books as case studies, and having students create their own comic book.

Topics

The authors have used comic books in the classroom as part of discussions to illustrate the universality of virtues and ethical dilemmas. From leadership and technology to discrimination and environmental issues, comic books can be used to address business-and-society issues. These narratives address responsibility (or lack of it) and action at several levels of analysis: individual, team, organizational or corporate, institutional, and planetary (society). This section identifies topics and how some comic books can illustrate them; additional ones are listed in Appendix A.

Business Ethics

There are ample cases of business ethics and the applications of ethical theories in comic books. A common theme is often the concept of justice – not just revenge, but also atonement, fairness, and egalitarianism. As mentioned in the pedagogy section, students have identified which ethical theory a given comic book character exhibits. For example, while an easy parallel between superheroes and virtue ethics is made, more subtle animations of consequentialism and deontology are seen in the characters of Magneto and Xavier in *X-Men*. Students explore what scope the characters consider in their decision-making: themselves, the team or immediate group, or society. In the *New X-Men: e is for extinction*, characters have to deal with their own ambitions and wants, the mission of the team, and the survival of a species. One portion of the storyline addresses the morality of the eradication of smallpox as well as another, more humanoid species – *homo superior*, the mutants.

Cognitive moral development is an underlying theme in the *Ultimate Spider-Man*, as the hero and other characters advance in their moral consideration of others and of society. Not all characters do move past Level 1 of Kohlberg's stages of cognitive moral development (Kohlberg, 1958), and others are in Level 2 at stages 3 or 4. One example is the growth of the character U-Go-Girl (of the X-Men spin-off *X-Force* later known as *X-Static*) who early in her tenure of the X-Force continually uses her telepathic powers for her own personal gain. Later, she develops into a fully functioning and responsible team member. A common theme for the 'birth' of the protagonist is the various stages of physical and moral development to Level 3. Indeed, many comic book characters designed for an adult audience has "distinct character flaws" (Steinberg, 2006, p. 2). Illustrating Aristotle's moderation, characters experience negative consequences when they ignore or give in completely to these flaws (going to either extreme). One example of this is Batman's paranoid tendencies, which help him with situational awareness but can be overdone when he spies on his trusted friends.

Leadership

Ethical leadership is communicated in comic books through negative and positive examples, unlike the media today that tends to focus on the examples of poor or unethical leadership. For example, at the individual level, the characters in the *X-Men* series serve various roles within the group/organization. Different leadership styles are shown by contrasting Cyclops, Storm, Xavier and others. The role of group instigator is adopted by Wolverine, who provides a critical perspective and fights against group think. The *Avengers* series present differences in leadership by gender, as well as the X-Men universes and its offshoot, *Exiles*.

Spider-Man is a popular comic book hero across the world. Spider-Man's real identity, Peter Parker constantly reminds us that "With great power comes great responsibility," originally told to him by his uncle. Whether we are managers or the CEO responsible to employees, society expects us to use our power in responsibly. Journalist Barry Moltz used Spider-Man's mantra in Moltz' call for responsible journalism. The phrase *With great power comes great responsibility* also can be related to Davis' (1973, 1975) Iron Law of Responsibility – an institution must use its power responsibly or it will be taken away from society. Power also comes from asymmetric levels of information, for example between a seller and a buyer. As such society has expectations that the seller will not cheat the buyer and has supported laws to provide more rights to consumers. In another sense, power can be viewed as the ability to use resources, and so with whatever power we have over other stakeholders, we have a responsibility to support them and we fulfill societal expectations. For Spider-Man, the responsibility is so great to use his abilities to help others that he gives up a 'normal' life and his girlfriend. Spider-Man expresses what many superheroes demonstrate – a commitment to use abilities and resources responsibly and ethically.

Diversity and teamwork

Within the mutant population in X-Men, every individual has a unique mutation or ability. The mutants begin to self-identify as part of the group that wants to take over the world (those with Magneto), those who want to live peacefully with the rest of humankind (those with Xavier), and those who have not permanently chosen a side yet have to make short-term choices on who to support, like

Wolverine or Rogue in the X-Men series. Within Magneto's and Xavier's groups, the mutants work together, acknowledging their differences while working as a team. The two groups even work together to stop a plot aimed at destroying all mutants, demonstrating a temporary coalition of stakeholders that otherwise would not work together.

The role of women has changed over the decades in comic books internationally. Shoujo manga is a genre of Japanese comic books also known as 'ladies' comics' that reflect concerns and difficulties of modern Japanese women socially and in the workplace. There were only two shoujo manga in 1980, but the number increased rapidly and the genre matured in the next 25 years as women increased their presence in the workplace and sought literary expressions of the issues and conflicts they experienced (Ogi, 2003). Wong and Cuklanz examined works from three comic book artists, Lee Wai-chun, Chan Ya, and Lau Lee-lee, that reflect the presence of more women in the workplace and question ''source elements of dominant gender ideology'' (Wong and Cuklanz, 2002, p. 253). In *Bringing Home the Sushi*, Japanese business culture is explored through several different comic book series (Silverman, 1995).

Marketing

The comic book industry has and continues to satire marketing practices through specific series (*Licensable Bear*^{TM}), through plotlines in other stories (*Ghost Rider 1/2* for deceptive marketing), and through 'joke ads' in other series (*Top 10*). *Licensable Bear*^{TM} follows a stuffed teddy bear through his efforts to promote himself and addresses topics such as trademarks and intellectual property rights, licensing and marketing, advertising, consumer confidence, corporate sponsorships, and regulation (Gertler, 2003, 2005, 2006). Recently, while advertising has served as a revenue stream for many comic book series, in-story product placement is increasing. For example, Marvel has recently put the Nike 'swoosh' logo in some scenes from the *New X-Men*. Time Warner's DC Comics has a six-part miniseries promoting General Motors Pontiac car (Steinberg, 2006). While product placement is not new as comic book series have promoted toys in the past, this new wave of advertising is aimed at a more mature audience and is less overt (Steinberg, 2006).

Business and government

Comic book protagonists (not always superheroes) have ''repeatedly sounded the warning that business dealings free of public scrutiny and government regulation ... led to ... crime'' (Wright, 2001, p. 24). In *Ghost Rider 1/2: Corporate Hell*, a fictional motorcycle company produces a bike that is dangerous and results in a number of deaths. The firm is sued in a wrongful death lawsuit that could have resulted in a costly recall of its Road Rocket motorcycle. The court sided with the firm, resulting in Ghost Rider's visit to the company's headquarters to exact revenge for knowingly allowing a defective product on the market.

Contrary to popular belief, comic books do not always portray issues in polarized, black-and-white terms. Through the development of a series, comic books can actually portray the complexities and nuances of situations. More oriented to younger students, comic books such as *Archie*, *The Fox and the Crow*, *Richie Rich*, and *Uncle Scrooge* communicate attitudes towards wealth, accumulation, and consumer culture as well as the social structure of wealth and class in the United States (Belk, 1987). Modern adult comic books – those oriented to the over-16 reader – provide more complex analyses and critiques of the roles of power, wealth, information, and resources. For example, *Too Much Coffee Man* #10 (Wheeler, 2000) provides a case study of the Liebeck lawsuit against McDonald's over spilled hot coffee and how the incident grew through misinformation and was eventually used as propaganda against tort reform. Generally a satire on materialism and modern business life, *Too Much Coffee Man* also addresses pollution, consumer rights, and the complexities of relationships among the media, large corporations, and government.

Internationalization

Comic books from other countries or in other languages (translated or captioned depending on the language proficiency of the students) can provide insights for students on business and culture. *Bringing Home the Sushi*, a collection of Japanese comics translated into English, serves to communicate Japanese workplace behaviors, concerns, and

expectations (Silverman, 1995). The comic book format allows the reader to get to know the Japanese businessperson in everyday situations, with a sense of humor that may overcome stereotypes.

Technology

From the turn of the 20th century, comic books have addressed technology and its impact on the world – first in the context of what was referred to as science fiction then and now in the context of what corporations are doing with the technology they develop. Comic books' complex narrative can explore such issues at several levels – from the scientists' conduct, to the organizations' responsibilities and accountability, to society's acceptance of the benefits and risks of technology. For example, the use of humans in laboratory tests and the pharmaceutical industry are confronted in the Captain America prequel *The Truth*, *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, and *Top 10*.

In several instances, corporations are portrayed as greedy organizations that are pursuing technological advances solely for profit without regard to the impact on society; however, there are other examples of organizations using technology to promote a better society, through enhanced transportation, medical cures, criminal enforcement, and preventing natural disasters. Some even offer a small glimpse into a society where, as Wonder Woman puts it, ''a harmonious balance between nature and technology'' can exist (Dini and Ross, 2001, no page given). Scientists and doctors are also shown in a positive light, whether in true adventure comic books or super-hero stories, as professionals pursuing a humane enterprise (Hansen, 2004). However, sometimes scientists' best intentions result in the creation of a supervillian such as the Lizard in *Spider-Man*. Comic book universes are ideal areas for society to work through its concerns about science and technology addressing technical concepts as well as social issues and concerns (Locke, 2005).

Postmodernism and Business

A postmodern perspective on corporations and consumer culture can be found in several comic books; Koscianski (2003) noted the comic book artist Charles Burns' illustrations convey the identity crises from consumer capitalism. But even in an alternate universe where physical laws may be different, characters cannot escape the broader issues of social concerns and ethics. The interactions of characters (humans or not) result in a set of social norms that have ethical implications in terms of power, self-determination, definitions of self and identity, as well as ethical considerations in terms of developing guidelines or rules for behavior in a social world. Elements of critical postmodernism such as alienation and fragmentation of society are addressed most directly in *X-Men*, with a fragmentation of society into *homo sapiens* and *homo superior* (mutants) and a further distinction between 'good' and 'bad' mutants. Focusing on critiques of hegemonic capitalism, Wolf-Meyer (2003) presents a detailed and intriguing analysis of the comic books *Watchmen* and *Miracleman* by Alan Moore and the characters in *The Avengers*, the *Justice League of America*, and the *Squadron Supreme*.

While corporations have been portrayed often as capitalism run amok, there are some examples of cooperative partnerships that are successful. An examination of the positive portrayals of enterprise might show us what values, desires, and needs future generations of employees may have. Certainly, a study of the language used in describing market mechanisms, organizations, and entrepreneurial activities would be illuminating. In addition, the comic book industry itself is also a topic worth exploring (see Raviv, 2002, for an interesting telling of the struggle for control of Marvel).

The comic book industry

Studying the comic book industry reveals an interesting, potential case study for use in a business and society class, specifically in the areas of marketing strategy, government and regulation, issues management, and philanthropy. In their five-country comparison of the comic book industry, Mayfield et al. (2001) highlight the impact of cultural differences on strategic choices, addressing customers, distribution, marketing, and pricing strategies. Internationalization of comic books, for example Japanese comic books in Korea, has increased business ties between countries and assisted marketing of products as well as the products of the comic books and characters (Glain, 1994). The international market for comic books is

growing: For example, Virgin Comics LLC started in 2005 with plans for at least seven titles in the U.S., Britain, and India (Hamm, 2006).

In an effort to prevent regulation, the comic book industry in the U.S. agreed to self-regulate themselves in response to accusations that the comic book industry was contributing to the delinquency of minors. In 1954 the comic book industry reacted to external pressure to change its content by forming their own, self-regulating organization with its own rating, or coding, scheme (e.g., Overstreet, 2005; Park, 2002). With the standards of publication of the Comic Code Authority, comic books toned down the images and the storylines more like morality tales (Overstreet, 2005; see Nyberg, 1998, for detailed discussion of the comic code). The Comic Code held sway for a number of years, but it was eventually rendered moot by the growing trend towards direct sales marketing (i.e., distributing books directly to comic shops and avoiding newsstands or drugstores) with both Marvel and DC Comics moving to direct marketing in 1979 (Overstreet, 2005). Based on the sale of comic books now in general bookstores as well as specialty stores, there is pressure on the sellers to regulate access to mature comic books, due to graphic violent or sexual content. These voluntary actions seem to have prevented strict government regulations of the industry to date.

A recent regulatory issue faced by Marvel underscores the international trade aspects and issues management. In a recent U.S. lawsuit, Marvel claimed that its imported action figures, or toys, were not representative of humans, because if they were, Marvel would have to pay a larger tariff fee (King, 2003). For those familiar with the Marvel X-Men universe of characters and stories, the argument in the lawsuit goes against Marvel's emphasis on the acceptance of others as worthy of personhood (to be considered human). This was a direct clash of the values purported by Marvel throughout their publishing history and their tactic in court to avoid tariffs.

Others have examined the comic book industry as a business; Jones (2004) and Raviv (2002) provide detailed histories of the comic book industry examining the role of competitive market forces, social pressures, and changing cultural norms. An excellent presentation of the power struggle for Marvel Enterprises, Dan Raviv's *Comic Wars* (2002) details the development and inner workings of the international comic book industry. Curan (2006) presents a concise summary of the market, the Metropolis Index (comic book investment index), and Comics Guaranty (a grading service).

Finally, strategic philanthropy is an integral part of the current comic book industry. After September, 11, 2001, U.S. comic book artists and writers developed several comic books of which the proceeds would benefit victims and for which the storylines examined the causes, actions, and consequences of the attacks. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the comic book industry made several accommodations for its sellers whose stores were damaged. There are several comic book series published free every year and widely distributed to encourage reading and to promote the genre. Some issues are published free of charge for military members deployed overseas (Colton, 2005). Because of the niche market, loyalty of customers, and durable relationships, the comic book industry is aware of its need to provide for its stakeholders and have a long-term outlook.

Conclusion

As with all media, some works are more appropriate for classroom use than others. While not every book or film is appropriate for classroom use (in terms of quality, theme, treatment, etc.), not every comic book is appropriate or useful for teaching ethics and business-and-society concepts. Educators *must* be familiar with the comic book or series, plotlines, topic, and other commentary for consideration of use in the classroom.[1]

As with any classroom discussion, the students' interpretations are affected by their biases, such as previous experiences and cultural norms (Kirsh and Olczak, 2002). Therefore, for use in the classroom, we recommend discussing the portrayal of violence in terms of both overt (physical) violence, relational violence (loss of freedoms or opportunities), and vigilantism. Just as sensational journalism is used to get attention, elicit an emotion, or emphasize something, violence in comic books is a narrative element that can be critiqued. In an undergraduate class, factors of a violent act were discussed in terms of a lack moral awareness and creativity on the part of the individual, barriers from the organization's leadership, and the institutional constraints such as laws or denial of certain human rights.

While comic books may be criticized for the depiction of violence, the characters often confront their frustrations and question "Who are we when we resort to violence?" (Cooper, 2004, p. 19). Interestingly, since comic books are usually a series of stories building on the past, the outcomes of violence are an integral part of the story. As these stories continue over several years and decades, the character often confronts the consequences of his or her unethical or violent acts, such as lost families, revenge, destroyed property, lost opportunities, and other negative consequences. Characters have to confront these consequences and continue to make choices. In some cases, characters can be seen to mature through their experiences and recognize their unethical behavior (such as Edie Sawyer (U-Go-Girl) in the X-Force and later X-Static series).

As a mature literary form, comic books communicate ideas and concerns about universal topics – ethical behavior, the role of organizations, and the institutions of business and government. We can use these modern narratives to discuss ethical decision-making and the social issues impacting management today. Comic books can help us to capture students' attention, exercise the moral imagination, and improve our understanding of the roles and impacts of business.

Appendix A

Appendix A contains some additional suggestions for various topics. This list is not exhaustive; we look forward to instructors communicating with us on other examples they found effective.

Topic	Comments
Employee Issues	Oracle in *Birds of Prey* and Charles Xavier in *X-Men* are just two of the many characters that are disabled and yet fully incorporated into the workplace. Well known for its fight against discrimination, the Marvel Universe includes people of various races, national origins, religions, and disabilities. For more information on the tensions among and the discrimination (and tolerance or inclusion of) humans and human-like characters, see Trushell (2004). Issues such as alcoholism and drug abuse have been tackled by comic titles including *Iron Man* #128 (volume 1; 1979) and *Green Arrow*. *Smax* (a spin-off comic book of *Top 10*) deals with affirmative action in issue #3 and provides an interesting dilemma for hiring quotas when dealing with multiple races (i.e., elf, troll, dwarf, etc.).
Gender Equity	*Fantastic Four* (245 (1982), among other titles, has explored gender equity in its own unique way, when Invisible Girl returns to find all her teammates incapacitated and must fight solo for the first time. *The Avengers* and *Exiles* also explore gender equity; Gustines (2002) examines the role of gay characters. *Top 10: Forty-Niners* (Moore and Ha, 2005) includes several gay characters. Risu Akizuki is a Japanese author and artist that recounts the Japanese 'office lady' starting in 1988 with *Okusama Shinkaron*.
Management	In response to recent corporate scandals, Alternative Comics started *Titans of Finance: True Tales of Money and Business*, a story line based on real CEOs' experiences (Pethokoukis, 2001). Although some villains are also businesspeople in their 'other life', several heroes are also businesspeople; for example, Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) runs his own company Stark Industries. Bruce Wayne (Batman) is one of the more famous superheroes as the heir and owner of Wayne Enterprises. Not a superhero, Lucius Fox is the ethical and loyal CEO that runs the conglomerate for Bruce Wayne in the movie *Batman Begins*. The Belgian *Largo Winch* series follows a young inheritor of a multinational corporation. Part of the X-Men, Warren Worthington III (Angel) is the successful heir and CEO of Worthington Industries. Positive portrayals of business people include not only those who use their superpowers but also those who do not have super powers and those who express a commitment to their community. In *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* #78 *The Blank Generation, Part I: Corporate Nightmares* and #79 *The*

Topic	Comments
	Blank Generation, Part II: A Favorable Wind, business people confront the choice of moving out of the community or staying and revitalizing the city. In the DC Comics universe, negative portrayals of business people include Warren White (The Great White Shark) who is a crooked investor who uses his business connections for criminal activities, Derek Powers as a corrupt leader in Batman's Gotham City, and the more infamous Lex Luthor as an industrialist and white-collar criminal in various Superman series. Negative examples in the Marvel universe include such characters as Norman Osborn as the Green Goblin, Obadiah Stane as the Iron Monger, and Sebastian Hiram Shaw as the mutant Black King. A perennial favorite for teaching environmentalism and the negative impact of man on nature is *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (several volumes, by Hayao Miyazaki, 1982–2004).
Corporate Crime	In 1977 and 1979, two issues of the series *Corporate Crime* appeared as anthologies of white collar crime. *Corporate Crime #1* looks at such corporate scandals as Karen Silkwood, the ITT scandal, the Dalkon Shield, miners' strikes, Freelandia Airlines, and nursing home owner Eugene Woods, as well as concerns over corporate monopolies in several industries. *Corporate Crime #2* continues addressing abuse of corporate power with stories on the Triangle Shirtwaist Co. fire, Life Science and the ketone controversy, false advertising, and J. P. Stevens employment practices record.
Consumer and Product Issues	*Ghost Rider 1/2* (2001) champions consumer protection and product safety. Ghost Rider deals with the CEO and senior management at a fictitious motorcycle company that sells accident-prone and shoddy motorcycles. Various short stories in *Corporate Crime #1* and *#2* (Dalkon Shield, dioxin, and Topps baseball cards). *Too Much Coffee Man* #10 (Wheeler, 2000) gives the facts of Stella Liebeck's lawsuit of McDonald's over an accident with hot coffee in 1992. The author shows the incident and follows it through to the end and then explains how it came to be an urban legend, following misinformation on the case through the media to 1995.
Supplier Relationships	Supplier issues can be seen in the *X-Men* series with Striker concealing information about the subcontractors, the product, and proprietary information. Tony Stark, Iron Man, runs his own firm and addresses supplier issues.
Community Involvement	Omega-Man series is an icon of community involvement, currently partnered with the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department to encourage youth to follow the law and to improve their writing skills. *Spirit of the Amazon* was a comic book series in Brazil that addresses corporate and political issues. It encouraged readers to get involved in social action in its short, two-issue run (Dobran, 2003).
Natural Environment	Business' impact on the natural environment is a central theme in many series, such as *Concrete* (first introduced in Dark Horse Presents #1 in 1986), *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, *Submariner*, and *Superman*. *Animal Man* #15 (1989) dealt with the issue of the slaughter of dolphins and other environmental issues. *Slow Death Funnies #1* came out on Earth Day, April 15, 1970, and addressed ecological problems and the role of corporations.
Cultural Diversity	*Peace Party* is a comic book with an action, adventure theme and focused on American Indian culture (Melmer, 2000). Echo, a Marvel superheroine is a Latina Native American and one of the few deaf comic book characters. *Top 10* (Moore et al., 2000, 2002) and its spinoffs *Top 10: The Forty-Niners* (Moore and Ha, 2005) and *Smax* deal extensively with cultural and sexual diversity.
Media	Compare the newspaper strategies and ethics in DC Comic's *Daily Planet* (Superman series) and Marvel's *Daily Bugle* (Spider-Man series). For more mature audiences, *V for Vendetta* shows the government and business using the media to form public opinion.
Research Ethics	The use of humans in laboratory tests and the pharmaceutical industry are confronted in various books, such as in the Captain America prequel miniseries, *The Truth*, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* (e.g., #21 (1984)) and *Top 10* (Moore et al., 2000, 2002).
Japanese Business	*Bringing Home the Sushi: An Inside Look at Japanese Business Through Japanese Comics* (Silverman, 1995) is a collection of Japanese comics translated into English about the Japanese workplace including salarymen and office ladies. Introductory essays on each topic provide cultural background.

Endnote

[1] We cannot stress enough that, like all teaching resources, instructors must be intimate with the content of the comics used in their courses and ensuring age appropriateness. For example, many titles by Alan Moore [*V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd, 1988), *Top 10* (Moore et al., 2000, 2002), and *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbon, 1995)] are mature-audience graphic novels.

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