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TRC Course Development Grant Report 2009

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DATE SUBMITTED: 8/31/2009

Title of Grant Award: Course Development Grant (Spring 2008)

Graphic Novels: Comics and the Cultures that Produce Them

Project Goal:

      This project creates an interdisciplinary course on an emerging literary tradition: comic books and graphic novels. It will develop a critical vocabulary for the analysis of sequential art in print and online forms. The course will also make a point of exposing students to comics traditions from outside the United States and connecting the art produced by those nations to the cultural traditions and economic processes that inform them. Therefore, the project requires research on scholarship about visual representation, particularly in the sequential format fundamental to comics, and on the use of the comics form in the United States and elsewhere.

When Implemented (Quarter the course was taught):

Fall, 2008

Brief Description of the Project (as described in the proposal):

      This project develops a new course called "Graphic Novels in Literature and Culture," which will be piloted as a graduate course in Fall 2008. As a graduate course, it will satisfy a requirement for students in the literature track of the M.A. program.
      Because students in our M.A. program frequently go on to teach and are often already teaching in local secondary schools, this course will be especially useful to our students, who can integrate graphic novels in their future teaching. Graduates earning an M.A. often move into community college teaching positions, where they can use graphic novels as a way to engage students of all reading levels and from a variety of backgrounds.
      The materials covered in this course will help develop an understanding of cultures that produce comics. Further, considering that most graphic novels are marketed for the late-teen and early-college reader, graphic novels present an opportunity for teachers to present their students with literature that will be met with enthusiasm.

      Specific goals for the development of this course include:

(1) developing the electronic infrastructure necessary to the course. I need to learn the contents and navigation of a new online comics art archive. I also need to develop content suitable for sharing through Blackboard.

(2) researching secondary materials for the class. There has recently been a surge in scholarship on comic books, much of it anthologized. I will need to look at the most recent collections of comics scholarship to see what would provide a diverse and affordable introduction to the arguments about comics.

How the Project Was Implemented (including how it differed from the original plan):

The course was offered in Fall 2008 with good enrollment and excellent responses to the course in course evaluations.

The course retained its commitment to engaging with up-to-date scholarship on the topic as well as broad access to online comics archives. It was also able to develop a critical vocabulary for the analysis of comics in both print and on-line forms.

The course also retained its goal of focusing on the interaction between culture and the production of comics. The assigned time arranged through this grant allowed the professor to explore three cultures and their unique comics-related histories in particular: those of the United States, Japan, and France. For the U.S., the grant allowed time to research the publishing and distribution history of comics, which provided an important backbone to the study of how comics were produced and consumed over nearly a century. For Japan, the grant allowed time to research the unique relationship between sequential art in comics and other Japanese artforms, particularly the *kamishibai*. For France, the grant allowed time to research the three dominant styles in which comics are illustrated: the realistic, comic-dynamic, and *ligne-claire* modes.

These were not the cultures I had originally planned to target, but there was not enough information currently in publication to make robust sketches of the role of comics in the cultures originally targeted (Mexican and Mexican-American, Iranian, and Korean). Therefore, the project followed the existing scholarship to develop useful sketches of the history of comics in these three countries, exhibiting a model for students to follow if they are interested in looking into how comics work in other countries.

Results of the Project:

This project resulted in a very successful graduate course in Fall 2008.

The professor was also able to take information from this course and develop a presentation for the campus community on the subject of Japanese comics.

Two students from the course have since worked on revising their final papers for publication in peer-reviewed journals. The first of these papers successfully focuses on subtle differences within one Japanese genre (*shoujo*). The second, which has been revised and submitted to the new international journal *Studies in Comics*, focuses on the existing critical vocabulary of comics and how that vocabulary might be adapted to critical theory. As culture and critical vocabulary were two of the main points of study for the course, these seem to be signs that the project was successful.