

A

Analysis of Evil: Using a Graphic Novel to Teach an Interdisciplinary Honors Course Involving Psychology and Serial Murder

By Dr. Greg Galardi, Assistant Professor, Peru State College, Peru, NE and
Dr. James Nevitt, Associate Professor, Peru State College, Peru, NE

Introduction

Media portrayals of murder, crime scene investigation and the psychological aspects of suspect investigation have exploded in recent years (Soulliere, 2003). Creating a course that allows for a higher level of student engagement and critical thinking strengthens undergraduate education (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). The creation of an interdisciplinary set of courses within the criminal justice and psychology disciplines allows instructors to actively engage students through a set of whodunit and problem solving exercises. The two course Honors series, titled *Analysis of Evil I & II*, began in the spring semester of 2006 at Peru State College. The first course topics in the *Analysis of Evil* series focus upon serial murder and criminal and psychological profiling. The second course topics included cult-related homicide, mass suicide and ritualized violence. The focus of this paper is *Analysis of Evil I*. As the courses evolved, the use of a graphic novel, in comic book format, was introduced in 2008 and became a primary means to reinforce and stimulate student learning by allowing students to follow the evolving psychological and criminal activities occurring in the fictional town of Black Mounds, Nebraska.

Course Design Considerations

The design of *Analysis of Evil I* allows students to not only ponder subject-related issues presented in traditional settings but also engage them in critical thinking and profiling activities inside a simulation specifically created to be compatible with traditionally presented subject matter. The course met twice a week for 75 minute periods. The course was supplemented using PowerPoint, handouts and pictorial descriptions of the ongoing psychological and criminal activities occurring in the fictional town of Black Mounds, Nebraska. As the course progressed, the addition of a graphic novel in 2008 to increase student engagement and interest was incorporated into the course structure. The rationale was to provide a visual medium to stimulate and reinforce discussions occurring in the traditional classroom environment setting which involved philosophical, theoretical and problem solving topics associated with

the course. Significant additional assigned reading focusing on topics associated with psychology, criminal justice and criminalistics were included in the course. The course also included an on line element where students and visitors to the website could follow the plot line of the course.

Course Instructional Materials

The primary course textbooks included *Psychopathy: Antisocial, Criminal and Violent Behavior* by Millon, Simonsen, Birket-Smith and Davis (2003) and *Serial Murderers and their Victims* (4th ed.) by Hickey (2006). An optional course textbook was *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* by Newton (2000).

Additionally, the authors of this article created a manuscript known as *Evolving a Theory of Evil in the 21st Century* (Nevitt and Galardi, 2005). This manuscript contained necessary background information to permit discussion of philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology and criminology as they applied to the topics of "extreme evil", "violence", "deviance" and "psychopathy". A summary of the most recent research regarding the subject matter and a student glossary of terms used throughout the course was included. The manuscript took approximately 150 hours to complete using conventional library and internet resources. Students received a paper of the manuscript at the beginning of the semester. An electronic copy was made available to the students as well.

PowerPoint presentations were used to supplement the lecture/discussion portion of the course. The presentations were between 40 and 90 frames in length. Textbook concepts and case studies are used to enhance the depth and breadth of student learning.

The ongoing graphic novel regarding the activities occurring in Black Mounds, Nebraska is provided to students.

The First Analysis of Evil Course: Serial Murder and Profiling

After review of pertinent theoretical and practical aspects of the concepts of evil, various connotations of evil within different academic disciplines, pathology, violence, the interplay of the mind of a psychotic or

psychopathic criminal (Millon, Simonsen, Birket-Smith and Davis, 2003), crime scene investigation (James and Nordby, 2003) and basic profiling concepts, such as organized vs. disorganized serial murderers (Hickey, 2006), an in depth exploration of several serial murder cases (Jack the Ripper, David Berkowitz, Ted Bundy, John Gacy) took place. As this investigation took place, a simultaneous graphic novel is distributed within the classroom and placed onto an Internet website to allow for interactions between students in the course, instructors and external constituents who wished to follow the plot line. Basic profiling concepts and aspects of famous cases incorporated into a graphic novel that featured the activities of profiling characters in the novel allowed practical evaluation of crime science evidence and student posturing as to who was the "killer" within the graphic novel. The class alternates between the actual world of forensic science and the fictional world provided by the graphic novel.

Creation of the Graphic Novel

While instructors obtained high levels of self reported student satisfaction and learning subsequent to team teaching an interdisciplinary honors course known as *Analysis of Evil I and II* in psychology and criminal justice during Spring 2006 and Spring 2007, ways to improve the course through other mediums were explored. The thought provoking nature of the psychological and criminal topics associated with the course were a natural segue for a more visual medium within the course.

Subsequently, the primary instructor, Dr. James Nevitt, created a graphic novel via comic book using *Comic Book Creator 2.0* (2007) to augment conventional textbook coverage of particular topics in *Analysis of Evil I*. This medium allowed further refinement and a more visual element to the unique plot-line using some of the same fictional environment and characters encountered in the *Analysis of Evil* courses. The graphic novel *The Autumn King Murders*, was featured in Fall 2008 as a part of HP 300, the first course in the two-course series. Creation of a graphic novel utilizing *Comic Book Creator 2.0* requires a significant amount of time of at least 25 hours per issue, however, students report the

end results as stimulating and as a means to increase curiosity with the content of the course.

Evolution and Utility of the Graphic Novel in Education

The history of graphic novels can be traced to education since their near-fatal demise in 1954 by psychologist Dr. Fredric Wertham. While treating the initial use of graphic novels with disdain, Dr. Wertham (1955) later expressed the positive attributes of the graphic novel when discussing this genre in his book, *The World of Fanzines: A Special Form of Communication*. Wertham praises the efforts of comic-book readers and presents graphic novels as a new model of communication by bright young people.

Kay Haugaard's 1973 plea for research on comic books is no less relevant today than it was those many years ago. Haugaard (1973) was a teacher and a mother of three boys, all of whom were reluctant readers. She found that it was only when her boys started to read comic books that they did not have to be "urged, coaxed, cajoled and drilled" to read.

Bonnie Norton (2003) conducted a study in an elementary school that suggested that the sense of ownership that children have over comic books accounted for the vibrant debate, discussion and critique of them. Such insights may help teachers reclaim literacy as a meaning-making practice. A particular challenge for high school teachers of struggling adolescent readers is that their level of sophistication in understanding complex issues exceeds their ability to access traditional texts. Often teachers are faced with two poor choices: give students a watered down text that doesn't meet a standard of conceptual complexity or give students a text that is far beyond their reading level.

Frey and Fisher (2004) discuss graphic novels, which are short novels done in the medium of comics, as an effective means of teaching struggling adolescent readers. Often, the authors would present comic panels without dialogue bubbles challenging students to predict what character were saying or thinking. Student recognition of the similarity between how artists and writers use language to communicate the ideas can become a bridge for teaching new information about reading comprehension.

Hall and Lucas (1999) describe the uses of comic books in collegiate sociology courses through parallelism. Morrison, Bryan and Chilcoat (2002) suggest the use of student-generated comic books in the classroom as another valuable means to reinforce student learning and increase student interest in the content matter. Kirsh and Olczak (2001) provide a cognitive perspective of violence on the use of comic books.

The overall evolution of the graphic novel at all levels of education reflects graphic novels as a alternate or supplemental means to support reinforcement of learning through a higher level of student interest. Use of the graphic novel in the Analysis of Evil courses supports these beliefs through self-reported student evaluation.

Creative Writing as a Means to Foster Appreciation of Subject Matter

The use of fantasy and fiction materials in a psychology courses may encourage creative expression as it relates to subject matter of the course. Carlson (1992) described a series of writing assignments in which entry

level graduate students in a personality theory class wrote four short papers interpreting the personality of a character from a children's story or comic strip. Each paper utilized a different theoretical orientation, such as psychoanalytic, dispositional, phenomenological or behavioral to allow for individual student evaluation of the topic under investigation. The paper included student feedback on the assignments and allowed for a deeper understanding by the instructor of students' perceptions of the content matter.

Why Horror Subject Matter in an Interdisciplinary Honors Course?

There is merit in excursions down cultural back-alleys. Minimally, three topics that resonate with psychology majors and fans of horror literature and films include: (1) The subject matter is emotional not intellectual. Horror writing is primarily an emotional medium; (2) fear of death and the horror that arises from media or literature that explores this concept; and (3) the renaissance of horror fiction and film is also a response to the terrors of contemporary life such as nuclear war and urban violence (King, 1981).

An Instructor-Created Simulation Using a Graphic Novel

The use of a simulation allows for an extensive level of student engagement and learning within the constraints of the collegiate environment. Student interest in the simulation increases as they become more knowledgeable and involved in the simulation itself.

What is a Simulation?

A simulation reproduces a set of givens and then a plausible situation derived from those givens. In this context, a participant must work to examine evidence, analyze documents, discuss a problem and otherwise engage in critical thinking.

Why Use Simulations?

A simulation, whether computer based or not, can be a powerful tool when used properly and in the right setting. Simulations help students actually experience a system or problem beyond just reading or hearing about it.

Role Play vs Simulation

Although some people do not differentiate simulations from role plays, the two instructional methods can be separated. Simulations require the students to act as they would act in the scenario, whereas role plays assign characteristics to students' roles and encourage acting. Simulations also provide key facts about the situation so that nothing has to be made up by the participant.

Instructor Roles

The instructor should function as an organizer and facilitator. As an **organizer**, the instructor must prepare materials, assign roles, brief the students on the rules of simulations and debrief the students at the end. As **facilitator**, the instructor should remain removed from the action of the simulation and should be willing to allow students to make mistakes in the protected simulation environment allowing for personal growth opportunities. If the simulation begins going awry, drastically reroute it by creatively entering a note or request to a participant in the scenario to change their actions.

Our First Simulation Using a Fictional serial Murder Case

The first novel/simulation *Dark Harvest In Black Mounds* was a "murder mystery" told through the medium of PowerPoint. There were relatively few illustrations in the endeavor. The simulation was divided much in the same way a novel is divided into chapters. Writing a murder mystery and adapting it for classroom use in a course requires not only imagination but also a familiarity with creative writing and an understanding of what might best appeal to a student audience. At the end of this document, a brief bibliography of creative writing books useful to the initial course creations as constructed assisted in developing the tale of gothic horror in a small Nebraska town called Black Mounds.

The Simulation in the Context of the Course

Using the tool of a simulation allowed me to present "the play in" of such topics as "offender and victim profiling" or "personal vs. banal evil" while engaging students in the process of turning ideas on their sides and challenging investigation groups to put theory into practice. As serious learning occurs, the boundaries of normal teaching practice are extended. It is difficult to estimate the number of hours of preparation this portion of the class.

Dr. Nevitt's Reflections on the Perception and Psychology Behind a Course Featuring a Horror Novel

The success of a course such as *Analysis of Evil I* requires both student and instructor to be passionate about the subject matter. Unfortunately, on many college campuses, most academic types and authority figures shy away from passionate discussions about evil, horror and serial killers. It's actually rather unfair and somewhat odd because horror fans and writers are perceived rather differently than other writers. Most people don't assume that just because a person who enjoys reading and writing romance they therefore live a life of unbridled passion and heaving bosoms. Horror writers, on the other hand, are considered to be not entirely "nice". People that write mysteries are seldom asked, "Why do you write that stuff?" When people that write science fiction are asked, "Where do you get your ideas?" - the questioner is friendly and inquisitive. That question posed to a person that writes horror is occasionally accompanied by fear and loathing.

The most common remark heard after explaining the nature of the course to some new friend or neighbor is "But you looked so normal to me!" Fortunately most students at Peru State College have an open mind regarding 'what a course could or should be'. Student and instructor enthusiasm concerning subject matter provides a lot of the impetus involved in many of my pleasant classroom experiences.

References

- Carlson, J. F. (1992). From metropolis to never-neverland: Analyzing fictional characters in a personality theory course. *Teaching of Psychology* 19 (3), 153-55.
- Comic Book Creator (2007). Aliso Viejo, CA: Planet-wide Media.
- Frey, N. & Fisher, D. (2004). Using graphic novels, anime and the Internet in an urban high school. *English Journal*, 93(19).

Hall, K. J. & Lucal, B. (1999). Tapping into parallel universes: Using superhero comic books in sociology courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 27(1), 60-66.

Haugaard, K. (1973). Comic books: Conduits to culture? *The Reading Teacher*, 27, 54-55.

Hickey, E. W. (2006). *Serial Murderers and their Victims* (4th ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

James, S. & Nordby, J. (2005). *Forensic Science: An introduction to scientific and investigative techniques* (2nd ed.). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

King, S. (1981) *Danse Macabre*. New York: Berkley Publishing.

Kirsh, S. J. & Otczak, P. V. (2001). 'I felt it tear flesh': *Violent Comics and Social cognition*. Paper presented at the 109th Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, San Diego, CA, August 24-28, 2001.

Millon, T., Simonsen, E., Birket-Smith, M., & Davis, D. (Eds.) (2003). *Psychopathy: Antisocial, Criminal and Violent Behavior*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Morrison, T. G., Bryan, G. & Chilcoat, G.W. (2002). Using student-generated comic books in the classroom. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 45(8), 758-67.

Nevitt, J. and Galardi, G. (2005) *Evolving a Theory of Evil in the 21st Century*. Unpublished Manuscript. Peru, NE: Peru State College

Newton, M. (2000). *The Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*. New York: Checkmark Books.

Norton, B. (2003). The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie Comics Readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(2).

Soulliere, D.M. (2003). Prime-time murder:

Presentations of murder on popular television justice programs. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10(1):12-38.

Umbach, P.D. & Wawrzynski, M.R. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 153-184.

Wertham, F. (1954). *Seduction of the innocent*. New York: Rineheart.

Wertham, F. (1955). *The world of fanzines: A special form of communication*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Williams, N. (1955). *The comic book as course book: Why and how*. Paper presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Long Beach, CA, March 26-April 1, 1995.

Creative Writing References

Brooks, T. (2003). *Sometimes the magic works: Lessons from a writing life*. New York: Del Ray Books.

Smith, G.N. (1997). *Writing horror fiction*. New York: Mid Point Trade Books.

Van Belkom, E. (2000). *Writing Horror*. Bellingham, WA: Self-Counsel Press.

Castle, M. (Ed.) (1997). *Writing horror: A handbook by the horror writers association*. Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books.

Dozois, G., Lee, T., Schmidt, S., Stock, J.R., & Williams, S. (Eds) (1991). *Writing science fiction and fantasy: 20 dynamic essays by the field's top professionals*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publication, Inc.

Biography

Dr. James Nevitt has over thirty years experience teaching in community colleges and four-year colleges in the state of Nebraska. He spent five years as an Addictions Counselor in Wichita, Kansas. He is now a tenured Associate Professor at Peru State College, Peru, Nebraska. His research interests are addictions, deviance, violence and personality disorders.

Dr. Greg Galardi is a retired Police Lieutenant from the City of Papillion, Nebraska and an Assistant Professor at Peru State College, Peru, Nebraska. His research interests include student learning, online instruction and learning, law enforcement management issues, uses of municipal police survey results and violence affecting law enforcement officers.