

It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Semiotics

Joseph Parrett

Introduction:

Superman first leapt a tall building and out powered a locomotive in 1938. A year later, Batman began striking fear into the hearts of criminals. Wonder Woman first twirled her magic lasso in 1941. These characters are culturally iconic. Superman's "S" shield and red cape are as recognizable around the world as Mickey Mouse's ears. Over the decades, superheroes entertained their fans in the forms of comic books, novels, radio programs, television shows, motion pictures and video games. They are a central piece to what is known as pop culture. It is little surprise that these colorful modern myths are beloved not just by a certain kindergarten teacher but also by the students filling his classroom year after year. But are these heroes powerful enough to supercharge the engagement in that classroom. My spider-senses are tingling a resounding "YES!"

My classroom is found at Kathleen Wilbur Elementary school in Bear, Delaware. Wilbur is a K-5 public school of almost 1,200 students. The school draws from a fairly diverse collection of communities in the Colonial School District of New Castle County in the northern part of the state. Our 1,200 come from motels, mansions, and everything in between. We are a Title I school and 100% of our population receives free breakfast and lunch. Wilbur houses 9 kindergarten classrooms. They are typically populated with between 18-22 students, though our rosters have ballooned as high as 26 in the past. Last year my class consisted of 22 students; 9 females and 13 males. Several ethnicities were represented. Within my class there were students receiving English Language Learner (ELL) support and speech services. In some years, my class also houses students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and students who are on a behavioral plan. I would anticipate a similar class make-up in future years.

Rationale:

I take note of what interests my students. It is an easy thing to do. Listen to them talking amongst themselves as they work and bond; watch their activities on the playground when they are free to do as they wish. I look at what they are wearing, what they carry their lunch in, and the backpack that they cart home daily. Children are regularly talking about Robin, the Hulk, and Spider-man whom they follow through their cartoon adventures. I have watched them chasing down the bad guys on the playground as their imaginary capes flap in the wind. I have also seen more superhero t-shirts, lunchboxes, folders, backpacks, notebooks, and toys make their way to the classroom than I can count. Recently, I put up a hallway display that featured Robin the Boy Wonder. On the

welcome back to school walkthrough night I witnessed kids of all grade levels, and some parents, stop and look at the display as they called out the name Robin. If a hand-drawn picture of a boy in a yellow cape can capture the attention of people in the hallway imagine how lessons about the Boy Wonder and his partner Batman will engage children. Superheroes is a slam dunk when it comes to engaging kids. But what about the idea of semiotics? How does that fit in with masks, capes, and kindergarten?

Simply put, semiotics is the study of signs. This is not only the understanding of literal signs like the red hexagon with the letters S, T, O, and P; it also incorporates communicating meaning through other ways, such as; artwork, text, gesture, facial expression, graffiti, architecture, medical symptoms, almost anything in which meaning can be found.

Meaning can be gleaned in several ways. For example, an image of an apple can simply mean the red piece of fruit. The same image could represent man's original sin. Still again, the apple could stand for good health. It is in our culture, also synonymous with a tech company. This may seem like a lot for primary students to take in. But, at its root, semiotics seems to be about connections. Connections between elements of the world around us and the meaning that we have within our brains for those elements. I once taught a kindergartner who connected a newly taught letter in an interesting way. When he saw the shape of the letter that represents the sound mmm, he immediately declared it "the butt letter." Much in the same way that I think quality electronics when I see that red piece of fruit.

A challenge with young students is getting them to exercise their higher level thinking skills. Thinking critically is very important, and we begin laying the foundation for doing so in kindergarten. Kindergarten's specific challenge is that our pupils, generally, cannot read. We teach with picture books. Finding meaning in the artwork of a page is using semiotics. We already do it daily. We teach semiotics when we begin teaching social skills. An example would be reading a peer's facial expression to determine how they are feeling.

Dovetailing superheroes and semiotics is an engaging way to strengthen critical thinking skills. Students will be thrilled to study the Flash and Captain America. They will not even realize that their brain is doing some heavy lifting as we carefully dissect the design of these beloved characters. A question similar to "Why does Captain America wear red, white, and blue?" may seem simplistic to any civic minded adult. But to a five-year old, connecting The Star Spangled Avenger to The Stars and Stripes is a worthy connection to forge.

Learning Objectives:

A priority in my class is raising the level of student engagement. Highly engaged students present fewer discipline issues and are more prone to working hard. They are also considerably more focused on the task at hand. Since students are drawn to comic book heroes, the use of these figures will indeed raise the level of engagement.

Wilbur Elementary has a new saying this year; “above or below the bar.” This is a way of categorizing questions and tasks. Is the task being asked of students above or below the bar? The bar is imaginary. Above the bar tasks and questions require the student to think critically. These tasks are relevant to the child and rigorous in their execution. In the terms of Bloom’s taxonomy, these tasks ask for the student to create, evaluate, or analyze. Below the bar tasks are more simplistic. They involve recall, and demonstrating understanding of concepts. While they can be important, they rarely stretch the thinker. Wilbur teachers strive to create above the bar tasks. In terms of superheroes, the question, “What is Batman’s secret identity?” is below the bar. Above the bar questions might include; “Why did Bruce Wayne (Batman’s secret identity) choose blacks, grays, and blues for his costume? Why did he choose a bat as his emblem? Why would he wear a patch of yellow on his chest?” This unit will require above the bar thinking from the students.

This unit addresses several English Language Arts (ELA) skills found in the Common Core State Standards. One skill that the students will be practicing is asking and answering questions. Kids are always asking questions of their own creation, but it is a learned skill to ask thoughtful questions about a topic at hand. Another skill the class will be working on is using words and phrases that they have acquired throughout the learning process. They will also be practicing the making of connections between individuals, ideas, or events from texts. This practice will be ongoing throughout the unit and it will also be relevant to the students and involve critical thinking making it most definitely above the bar.

Content Objectives:

Semiotics

As previously stated, semiotics is the study of signs. When considering semiotics any symbol or image can be thought of as an onion. Each image or sign consists of several layers to peel back as we look for meaning. Perhaps the top layer of our “onion” could be equated to the signifier. The signifier is the description of what we see. For example, the signifier may be a white apple with a bite taken out of its right side and a solitary leaf floating above it. Peel back another layer, and you may explore the signified. The signified is what the signifier represents. In the case of the white apple, the signified is the tech company Apple, which creates iPhones, iPads, and laptop computers, among

other things. The signifier can be readily identified by a wide range of people from different cultures. The signified can be more difficult to discern. To understand the signified the viewer must have specific background knowledge. The Apple company is well known in technological cultures. However, in a culture lacking access to high-tech devices, the white apple missing a bite could just represent a partially eaten fruit. The signified depends very much on the viewer of the sign. A person's gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, age, or nationality are attributes which greatly determine what is signified by the signifier. These attributes add more layers to our semiotic onion. A specific form of signifier that I will look in this unit at is the symbol. Symbols are signs that arbitrarily tie together a signifier and the signified. In the world of superheroes symbols are the emblems that many heroes wear proudly upon their chest.

Superheroes

Superheroes are so prevalent in our American (and to a certain degree, world) culture today that they represent a common (though somewhat shallow) pool of background knowledge in my classroom. Mostly, all of my students are familiar with superheroes. They come to kindergarten with common expectations of a character wearing a cape and mask. This common background knowledge will enable us to explore the elements of these characters as we examine the signifier and seek out the signified. I have included information on several prominent heroes that I intend to use as examples in class, but really all superhero characters would work for this unit.

Superman

Superman was the first superhero. He was created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and was introduced to the world in 1938. In the stories, Superman was delivered to Earth in a rocket launched to escape the destruction of his home planet, Krypton. Superman or Kal-El, as he was known on Krypton, arrived at his adopted home world as an infant. His rocket crashed into the fields of Jonathan and Martha Kent of Smallville, Kansas. Kal-El, raised as Clark Kent, grew up in small town America. As Clark aged, his alien body absorbed the radiation of our yellow sun and began to exhibit otherworldly powers. He could leap tall buildings in a single bound (this later morphed into the ability to fly). He was remarkably strong and fast. His skin was virtually invulnerable. Throughout the years, Clark gained additional powers which would serve him well in his ongoing battles against the forces of evil.

As a signifier, Superman would be described as a tall, dark haired, heavily muscled man. He wears blue tights and red shorts and boots. Upon his chest rests his emblem, a stylized letter "S" in yellow and red. Perhaps, most iconic is the red cape that hangs down his back as he soars through the skies of Smallville and later his adopted hometown of Metropolis. Alex Ross, a popular artist of Superman's adventures discussed the importance this last bit of costume; "the key is that the cape does all the talking for him –

it creates a flamboyant sense of movement so he doesn't have to."¹ The cape is the key to drawing Superman. It is also a key element of the character recognized around the world.

So what is signified by this blue and red clad hero? There are a lot of layers to this particular onion. Being the first of his kind, Superman represents the entire genre of "superhero." He is pretty much the king of the superheroes. He also is a role model for his readers to emulate. He is an ideal to aspire to. He is good, truthful, a source of hope, and is trustworthy. On another layer, he represents America. Clark Kent was raised in small town, Midwestern America and later moved to the fictional Metropolis where he represents big city America. As stated in the introduction to the 1952-58 television series *The Adventures of Superman*, he fights a "never ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way."² Linking these signified elements, does it seem that America should be taken as good, truthful, a source of hope, and trustworthiness? Some have even linked the man of steel (Superman) to Christ. In the comics he has sacrificed his life for the people the people he watches over. He also rose from the dead to continue serving his people. Interestingly, Superman's "S" shield on his chest is an example of semiotics within semiotics. In modern comic book continuity, this shield is said to represent Kal-El's family crest from Krypton. Its similarity to our letter "S" is explained as merely a coincidence. Further, as the first superhero, Superman's chest emblem has set a standard which many later designed superheroes have copied. Batman, Spider-Man, The Flash, Green Lantern, among others, all have an emblem affixed to their chests. It is a standard in the design of comic book heroes.

Batman

Bruce Wayne was a young boy when his mother and father were murdered by a mugger in Gotham City. He swore over their graves that he would fight crime and protect the citizens of Gotham. As he grew up, he trained his body and mind to the peak of human performance. One night as he was considering how to carry out his vow, a bat flew through the window of his home. Bruce was startled, but he was also inspired. He knew that "criminals, by nature, are a cowardly and superstitious lot."³ To strike fear into the wrong-doers of Gotham, Bruce would become a bat. Draping himself in dark leather, Bruce began a war on crime, on a nightly basis, to uphold his vow to protect Gothamites. Batman was introduced to comic readers in *Detective Comics* #27, 1939. The character was created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger. Over the years, the character of Batman has undergone many changes. The Batman character has been cheesy, as in the *Batman* television show of the 60s. He has been grim and dark predominately in the 80s and 90s. He has been a loner, a partner, and part of a team. He adopted an orphan named Dick Grayson, who would train to become the first comic book sidekick, Robin the Boy Wonder. He would later train another student, Barbara Gordon, the Batgirl. He was also a regular member of the Justice League of America, along with Superman and many other heroes a few of whom we will discuss shortly.

Batman the signifier, is a tall, white, dark haired and muscular man. That is where the similarities to Superman come to an end. He dresses in grey or black tights. He dons a blue or black cape, black boots, and a stylized pointed-ear cowl to mask his face. These elements give him a bat-like appearance. He sports a chest emblem as well. Depending on the version of Batman in the story, the emblem is a stylized black bat, or a black bat surrounded by a yellow oval.

Batman stands for Justice. Justice is signified by the Batman. He punishes those who commit crimes. He is also a bit of a dichotomy. Though he hates criminals and punishes crime he himself is often at odds with the police force of Gotham as he is frequently seen as a vigilante. Batman was the second superhero, but he was a first of his kind of character as well. Bruce Wayne has no super powers. He is not godlike (as is Superman). He did not gain powers through mystical or scientific means. He is ultimately just a human. In fact, some may view him as the ultimate human.

Batman and Superman are linked together frequently. In fact, the two were the basis of a major motion picture released in 2016, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Why are these two often seen in competition with each other, despite the fact that they are both “good guys” and that they work together in the Justice League? One reason could be that Superman, flies around unmasked in the sunlight from which he derives his power. Batman stalks the shadows of Gotham throughout the night concealing his identity. The pair are symbolic of the daily battle between day and night.

Wonder Woman

If Superman can be considered the king of the superheroes, then Wonder Woman is the unquestionable queen. Diana of Themyscira, first appeared in *All-Star Comics* #8, 1941. She was created by William Moulton Marston. Her origin story has changed over the years, but the most prevalent version has Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, sculpting a child from clay. The queen then prayed to the ancient Greek gods for a child of her own. Those gods granted her request and Diana was given life. Diana grew up in the Amazon culture. She was also blessed by the Olympian gods with great gifts of power. She (in most versions) can fly. She is remarkably strong and fast. She is quick witted and a well-trained warrior. She is armed with a magic lasso which compels anyone entwined within to be truthful. Diana left her home of Themyscira to bring love and peace to what the amazons call man’s world. Given her connections to Mount Olympus, Diana naturally is rooted in Greek Mythology. She regularly, interacts with the likes of Zeus, the father of the gods, Aries the god of war, and Aphrodite, goddess of love.

Wonder Woman the signifier is a tall, statuesque white woman with long black hair. She is beautiful with toned muscles. She most often wears a red and blue outfit (sometimes with white stars on the field of blue) and tall red boots. Across her chest is a stylized golden “W”. At her hip she wears her glowing golden lasso coiled and at the

ready. When discussing drawing Wonder Woman, Alex Ross is quoted as saying that she has to look “physically imposing and feminine at the same time.”⁴

Mythology and mythological tales are signified by Diana. She walks among the ancient gods and heroes of Greece. At the same time, she covers herself in the colors of America. So the United States is also signified in the Wonder Woman character. Where Superman represents hope, and Batman justice, Wonder Woman represents love. She stands for love and often fights for it as well. Truth is also signified by Wonder Woman, as through her lasso, she compels the truth from anybody she asks. Interestingly, William Moulton Marston, her creator, is one of the people credited with the invention of the polygraph (the lie detector). Wonder Woman also stands as an example of female empowerment. She was the first woman superhero. She is on par with Superman in terms of power. She is his equal. Her prominence in terms of feminism transcend the literary world. She was actually briefly named as a “UN Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls,” though this honor was dropped following protests and a petition.

Aquaman

Created by Paul Norris and Mort Weisinger, Aquaman first graced the comic page in 1941. He appeared first in *More Fun Comics* #73. Orin (his birth name) was born in the sunken city of Atlantis. Due to his blonde hair he was deemed cursed and abandoned on a reef as an infant. Orin was discovered and raised by a lighthouse keeper named Arthur Curry. Adopting his new father’s name, Arthur grew up and became a superhero named Aquaman. He later learned that his mother was the queen of Atlantis. Through his adventures he protects both the undersea world, and the world of man on land. He has great strength, is a remarkable swimmer, and can communicate with all forms of underwater life. Eventually, he would ascend to the throne of Atlantis, where he balances protecting the world as Aquaman and leading the kingdom of Atlantis as King Arthur.

Aquaman is often illustrated in possession of a powerful artifact in the form of a trident- remarkably similar to the trident carried by the Greek God Poseidon. Additionally, an eagle-eyed kindergarten student may recognize this artifact as the same one held by King Trident, the ruler of the ocean in *Disney’s Little Mermaid*.

The signifier for Aquaman is a blonde, muscular white man with blue eyes and occasionally a blonde beard. He dresses in an orange top and green pants usually drawn with fins on the back of the calves. Though Aquaman does not wear a chest emblem, he is commonly drawn wearing a golden belt emblazoned with an uppercase “A”.

Aquaman signifies the sea. He controls the sea and is master of the domain. He is so much like Poseidon that he harkens back to mythology much like Wonder Woman. His origin story is also highly related to the myth of the lost civilization of Atlantis, which

has been a part of popular culture around the world for centuries. Orin was also abandoned as a child from his birth culture and though he was raised human, he is not truly a part of his adopted society either. Therefore, Aquaman also is relatable as an outsider, something many readers feel they can relate to. Finally, in some stories, after he takes the throne of Atlantis, Aquaman is literally referred to as King Arthur. Some of his adventures during this time resonate with tales of another King and his kingdom of Camelot.

The Flash

There have been several characters that have gone by the name The Flash. I will focus on two of them. The original Flash, created by Gardner Fox and Harry Lampert, was a man by the name of Jay Garrick. Jay took off running as the Flash in 1940, in *Flash Comics* #1. He was a scientist who was caught in a lab accident. The accident left him with the ability to run at superhuman speed. He called himself the Flash and fought crime as a vigilante. In 1956, a new Flash replaced Jay. Created by Robert Kanigher and Carmine Infantino, Barry Allen was a police scientist who was bathed in chemicals after a lightning bolt struck his laboratory. The chemicals transformed Barry into the fastest man alive, the Flash. This new or silver aged Flash also used his amazing speed to battle criminals and protect the Earth.

Jay Garrick, the signifier, is a white man with dark (later grey) hair and an athletic build. He wears blue pants with yellow lightning bolts down the legs. He also wears a red top with a yellow lightning bolt on the chest. His attire is completed by red winged boots and a silver helmet with long yellow wings pointed back, extending from the sides.

Barry Allen is the second Flash. As a signifier, Barry is a blonde man with an athletic build. He wears a red body suit complete with a cowl that masks his identity. On his chest is the emblem of the Flash, it is a white circle with a jagged, yellow lightning bolt bisecting it from the upper right to the lower left. There are also yellow bolts running around his forearms and his waist. He wears yellow boots. His cowl has yellow wings (similar to Jay's and Hermes') extending from his ears and pointing back.

Jay's helmet is a direct replica of the headgear worn by the messenger of the Greek gods, Hermes. Although Jay wears boots they are strikingly similar to the winged sandals also worn by Hermes. As the messenger to the gods, Hermes was remarkably fast. Jay's outfit signifies his connection to Hermes and thus to the speed of that Greek god. Barry's outfit while not as blatant as the original Flash also harkens back to the winged helmet of Hermes'. Barry too is likened to speed in this way. Both heroes incorporate lightning bolts into their uniforms. I would connect the thunderbolts with the concept of a flash of lightning. The hero most certainly got his moniker from this turn of phrase. The name Flash also relates to the common phrase "in a flash," as in Barry could stop crime in a flash. Prior to their gaining super human powers, both Barry and Jay worked as scientists.

Both men also gained their powers while going about their business of science. As a hero the Flash can also signify science or scientific advancement. Developed in the 40s and 60s, the two Flashes were dreamt up in times of great scientific advances. So in a way, either Flash could signify man harnessing the power of science. Taken a step further, lightning has also been strongly associated with the Greek god Zeus. So the Flash capturing the power of lightning, is also in a way representative of man harnessing the power of god.

Captain America

Captain America Comics #1 was released in March of 1941. The character was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Steve Rogers was a scrawny but patriotic American who wanted to fight for his country against the Nazis in World War II. Due to his physical limitations, Steve was denied entrance into the military. He did however qualify for a secret government experiment. American scientists were working to develop a super soldier for the war effort. They injected Steve with a secret serum and he was transformed into an ultra-powerful and quick, perfect example of a man. Cap (as he was sometimes called) went on to battle the Nazis in WWII and would later take his talents back to protect the United States from threats both external and internal.

When viewed as a signifier, Captain America is a tall, powerfully built, blonde-haired and blue-eyed man. He is an example of physical perfection in Western culture. His uniform is largely blue tights. Circling his costume around his abdomen are a series of vertical red and white stripes. He wears red combat boots and red gloves. On his chest rests a large white star. His suit is also connected to a cowl which covers his face. The hood is primarily blue but there is often a white, uppercase 'A' on his forehead. On the sides of his cowl facing backwards are two white wings. Captain America also carries a circular shield with a central white star surround by a field of blue and then stripes of red, white, and another red.

As the name implies, Steve Rogers signifies America. He wears the flag for a uniform. On the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1, Cap is depicted knocking out Adolf Hitler. This was a bold move on the part of the comic's creators. Issue one came out months before the US was officially involved in World War II and it featured the title character physically attacking a then sitting head of state. Not only does Captain America stand for the Stars and Stripes, he sometimes depicts the mood or desires of the population of the country. More than just the political leaning of the nation, Cap obviously stands for the military might of the nation. That comic cover basically promises that the US would knock out the Nazi regime. Much as the Flash does, so too does Captain America represent the power of science. Imagine, if science can transform a weakling into a powerhouse, what else could it transform? Cap's shield itself signifies the protection of the United States. Captain America also heavily parallels the image of Uncle Sam from old recruitment posters.

Spider-Man

Amazing Fantasy #15 marks the first appearance of Spider-Man. Created by Stan Lee it was released in 1962. Peter Parker was a physically weak but intellectually strong boy in high school. He was bullied and unpopular. His life changed when he attended a science exhibition and was bitten by a radioactive spider. He gained powers reminiscent of the arachnid. He had tremendous strength, amazing agility, and the ability to cling to surfaces. This last ability allowed him to climb walls and hang from ceilings. Using his intellect and affinity for science, Peter developed web shooters (devices that he wore on his wrist) which launched sticky webs that he could use to swing around the city and incapacitate villains. When he first got his powers, Peter learned an important lesson; “with great power there must also come great responsibility.”⁵ This lesson did cost Peter the life of his Uncle Ben.

Spider-Man is signified by an athletic appearing (after the spider bite) male. He wears a tight bodysuit of blue and red. The red on his costume is covered in a black web-like pattern. On his chest is an emblem of a black spider. His head is covered entirely by a red web-patterned mask with large, white, expressive eyes.

Spider-Man signifies the power of science, most specifically nuclear science due to the radioactive spider bite delivering his powers. Much like Captain America and the Flash, Peter Parker represents man’s control of the powers of science. Spider-Man also signifies youth. Until Spider-Man every title’s main hero was an adult. There were other young characters like Robin, but they were always in the role of sidekick, an underling of the primary protagonist. Spider-Man is a protagonist who is written as a youth. He fought crime while dealing with the problems and issues of a young person. How do you protect the city and study for your science test? Due to this unique take on the superhero genre, Spider-Man quickly became a best sell character and rivaled or outsold the originals like Superman.

Black Panther

Created in 1966 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the Black Panther was the first black superhero to break into mainstream American comics. T’Challa is the king of the fictional African country of Wakanda. In preparation for his role as monarch, T’Challa studied at the best schools of Europe and America and trained his body to peak performance. He frequently joins with the Fantastic Four and Avengers to protect the world at large, but his priority has always been serving the people of Wakanda.

The Black Panther is signified by a tall well-muscled African man. When in costume, he is covered head to toe in a black bodysuit. His cowl is adorned with panther ears

(which look strikingly like Batman's). The eyes of his mask are white. He wears a tribal totem around his neck which is made with claws and a pendant of a panther's head.

The Black Panther signifies diversity. He was the first lead character for either Marvel or DC comics of African descent. He opened the gate for heroes of color, to the world of American comics. When considering the political climate of the United States in the 1960s, it is hard not to link Black Panther to the American Civil Rights movement. Both the character and the Black Panther Party, a black activist organization were created in 1966.

Heroes to Semiotics

I have chosen the heroes above to focus on throughout my unit. However, there are tons of heroes to choose from for this activity. To go from a superhero to an activity utilizing semiotics to get kids thinking takes a little work. It all begins by looking at the hero and considering the elements of the costume. Consider whether you can connect elements of costumes to other content. The Flash's connection to Hermes is a good example of this. Then explore the origin story of the hero. Are there any content connections in these tales? An example of this would be connecting Spider-Man to science. Finally, look at how the character is portrayed in different media. Batman is connected to the night not only in name, though that is certainly true, but also when he appears in Batman stories. Batman almost exclusively stalks the night, whether he is appearing in film, comic book, or video game. Students will likely know most of these heroes. They will also have connections for these characters. It is important to remain open to exploring a student discovered connection, as this will lead to some amazing learning.

Strategies:

Kagan Structure: Quiz, Quiz, Trade

This is a strategy designed to maximize student engagement. Each student is given a card with a word, picture, or question on it. They then stand up, spread out around the room and raise their hands. Each student high fives a partner and then takes turns quizzing their new partner on the contents of the card. After each partner conducts a quiz, the partners thank each other, raise their hands, and find a new partner to begin again. This of course is a very simplified explanation of Quiz, Quiz, Trade. For more details, I would investigate Kagan structures.

Making Connections

In class we frequently work on making connections. Typically, we try to find connections between a story (or the content) and ourselves, between two different stories, and between a story and the real world. We will be focusing on making connections between

our superheroes and either ourselves, stories we know, or the real world. As mentioned earlier, connecting Captain America and the flag of our country is a worthy connection to make.

Building Background

A challenge in any classroom is to build a common pool of background knowledge. Most of the students will know the heroes that I have chosen for my unit. However, some may need more information to truly be able to think critically about the semiotics of these characters. To build common knowledge, I will be sharing several stories or video clips to help the students understand the characters at a deeper level. Students will also be sharing their knowledge of the characters.

Graphic Organizers

A standard “go to” strategy is to have students use graphic organizers to track information. There are graphic organizers for many different purposes, but I feel the most useful for my purposes is a KWL chart (what I know, what I want to know, and what I learned). For our heroes we will complete KWL charts to help us focus and make use of our knowledge. We will also utilize webs to record ideas generated about characters.

Classroom Activities:

Activity One: Guess Who?

The goal of activity one is to introduce our new topic, superheroes, while at the same time getting students excited for the coming lessons. The close of the activity will have students sharing prior background knowledge about heroes. This will serve two purposes, it will activate their brains for future lessons, it will also give me a glimpse into where the class is in relation to the content.

In preparation for activity one, I will locate pictures of several prominent superheroes. The heroes I’ve previously discussed will most certainly be included but I could also add from a wide range of popular characters. The easiest way I know to find pictures is to conduct an internet search for images of the characters by name. Once I have found my characters, I will create a flashcard of a sort for the students to use.

Creating a flashcard will go as such; select a hero’s picture and then print that image, about the size of an index card, in color. Take the same picture and proceed to zoom and crop the image into a smaller piece of the whole picture. For example, I could take a picture of Superman, zoom in and crop the picture to just show a portion of his “S” emblem. I will then glue my pictures onto opposite sides of an index card. I will repeat this process for each picture that I will use. Ideally I will have enough cards for each class

member to have one with a few extras to spare. It would work to have duplicates of the same card in the deck. I would highly recommend laminating these cards as young students can be fairly rough on index cards.

I will introduce the activity to the whole group by showing a zoomed in picture of a hero on the smartboard (though it could easily be done just using a card from the deck.) I will choose an obvious superhero for this introduction. A picture showing the Bat symbol from Batman would likely be very recognizable to the students and should allow everyone to feel successful with the activity, as well as get them engaged. I will then ask the students to identify who is in the picture. After several students have had the opportunity to voice their answers, I will reveal the uncropped image and they can see that it is indeed Batman.

I will then tell the class that we will be doing the Kagan strategy, Quiz, Quiz, Trade. This activity is designed to actively engage the class. Quiz, Quiz, Trade is briefly detailed in the strategies section but to truly gain an appreciation for the strategy, I'd suggest a quick research on Kagan strategies. It is worth mentioning that when a partner is conducting a quiz, they will be holding the card with the cropped picture facing their partner. The quizzier will be able to see the full picture of the hero, and thus the correct answer to their quiz.

At the completion of Quiz, Quiz, Trade, the class will gather and generate a list of the heroes that we worked with that day. I will also begin generating a KWL chart where we will share "what we know" already about superheroes.

Activity Two: This Character Reminds Me of...

Activity two is designed to enhance student background knowledge of the content and to begin forging connections between the heroes and other stories, other characters, or even the real world. The lesson begins with a review of last lesson's KWL chart. From there we dive into the specific heroes that we will explore.

I will begin with the first of the superheroes, Superman. I will introduce the character through a combination of children's literature and video clips. There are literally hundreds of children's book and cartoons featuring the Man of Steel. Many are available for purchase or viewing online. After introducing the character, I will begin an idea web. At the center of the web I will write the name Superman. All around this center hub we will link things that the class knows about the character. I would expect that they will offer suggestions like, he wears a cape, he can fly, he is really strong, and the like. After recording their ideas, I will expand on several topics about Superman. I will focus on his powers, his origin story, and his costume (specifically his chest emblem).

I will then use colored markers to highlight (or draw circles around) our Superman ideas on our web. I will link all costume components in one color, Elements of the Superman story in a second color, and references to his powers in a third. Random comments or ideas that don't fit into one of these three focus areas will be circled in the fourth color and will make up a miscellaneous category.

We can extend our web by adding connections to many of the Superman ideas of the web. For example, next to "he can fly" we can add a link to birds, planes, any number of other flying heroes. These new additions will highlight some connections that we are creating. Many superheroes rise from tragedy, which should be discussed thoughtfully. Superman's parent died when Krypton exploded. Know your class and tread carefully in these waters, it can be an unpleasant connection if a child in class has recently lost a parent. These can be powerful connections to other stories, but always be wary of real life connections too.

The pacing for this activity is hard to anticipate. I would imagine that, for characters like Superman or Batman, the class will have a depth of prior background knowledge. It could very well take a class period for a character as well known as the two mentioned. Lesser known characters may move the activity along more quickly. We will complete this activity by posting our idea webs for easy reference later.

Activity Three: Design Your Own Hero

In our culminating activity, the students will design their own hero. I will be modeling the creation process for the students. First, I will start with a simple graphic organizer. Fold a paper into four quadrants. Each quadrant will receive a label; name, powers, story, and costume. I will begin by filling in my organizer. Throughout the process I will point out connections between information in my different quadrants. If, for example, I was to call my character Muscle Man, I may make his emblem a barbell on his chest, his obvious power would be super strength, and his story make feature great power at an early age. Of course, I would also illustrate my character showing off his costume.

Students will then follow the same process to create their own superhero. It is important to note that in kindergarten dictation is considered a form of writing. Given my student's age and writing abilities, I anticipate a lot of dictation. It may be beneficial to provide the students with a basic body shape for their heroic drawing. Some will want to draw their own, but others will be more successful if they just focus on decorating a person shape with their costume ideas.

As a wrap up, I will provide time for students to share their creations with either the whole class or in small groups. This will allow them to practice some common core speaking and listening standards.

Bibliography: *(should be flush left. Be consistent on using curly or straight quotes. Should be straight.)*

Berger, Arthur Asa. *Seeing is believing: an introduction to visual communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2012.

A good resource to build background on the subject and components of semiotics.

Cohn, Neil. "Comics, Linguistics, and Visual Language: The Past and Future of a Field." *Semanticscholar.org*. Accessed July 12, 2017. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/00aa/0283ebf8f6386daef947754c38e66c02634b.pdf>.

An interesting paper that doesn't address heroes in general but does break down the workings of comic books and graphic novels very nicely.

Deimers-Olivier, Myriam. "Superman: What Makes Him So Iconic." *Popculture11.files.wordpress.com*. Accessed July 12, 2017. <https://popculture11.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/myriam20demers-olivier20superman.pdf>.

A good resource that breaks down the semiotics and meanings associated with Superman.

Hall, Sean. *This means this, this means that: a users guide to semiotics*. London: Laurence King, 2012.

The handbook for the DTI course, it is invaluable in gaining an understanding of semiotics and gives many visual examples of semiotic principals.

Lee, Stan, and Steve Ditko. *The Amazing Spider-Man masterworks, volume 1*. New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1992.

A reprint that includes the original Spider-Man story.

Levine, Sara. "The Semiotics of Sequential Art." *CCTP748 Media Theory and Digital Culture*. Accessed July 12, 2017. <https://blogs.commonsgorgetown.edu/cctp-748-spring2013/2013/02/20/561/>.

A paper which applies semiotics to pages from graphic novels.

Loeb, Jeph, and Jim Lee. *Batman, Hush*. Barcelona: Planeta DeAgostini, 2011.

A Batman graphic novel that reviews his beginnings.

Ross, Alex, Chip Kidd, and Geoff Spear. *Mythology: the DC Comics art of Alex Ross*. London: Titan, 2005.

I found this to be an insightful book. Alex Ross is a prominent comic book artist and he discusses elements of different characters. Very useful for background knowledge on the creation of some of the characters I have chosen to feature in this unit.

The Adventures of Superman. Performed by George Reeves. USA, 1952. DVD.

Prominent Superman television show. With an iconic introduction. “Look up in the sky, it’s a bird, it’s a plane...”

The DC comics encyclopedia updated: the definitive guide to the characters of the DC universe. New York: DK Pub., 2004.

A fantastic resource to learn about the characters of publisher DC comics.

The Marvel comics encyclopedia: the definitive guide to the characters of the Marvel universe. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2009.

A fantastic resource to learn about the characters of publisher Marvel comics.

Appendices:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.K.1.D: Understand and use question words (ex. Who, what, where, when, why, how)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.K.6: Use words and phrases acquired through conversations, reading and being read to, and responding to texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.K.3: With prompting and support, describe the connection between two individuals, events, ideas, or pieces of information in a text.

CCSS.ELA-Speaking & Listening.K.SL.5: Add drawings and other displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail.

Should there be a title here that says NOTES?

¹ Alex Ross, *Mythology: The DC Comics Art of Alex Ross*

² George Reeves, *The Adventures of Superman*, 1952

³ Jeph Loeb & Jim Lee, *Batman: Hush*

⁴ Ross, *Mythology*

⁵ Stan Lee & Steve Ditko, *The Amazing Spider-Man masterworks, volume 1*