

Comics: They're Not Just for Kids Anymore

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An emerging trend in the Western world, Japanese-style comics may be a natural fit to mobile and blended learning solutions — with particular appeal to generations X and Y, audiences with lower reading levels, students with a preference for visual learning and time-constrained individuals.



Say the word “comic” and one typically thinks of cartoons, characters, magazine racks and children — in other words, childish entertainment.

Say the word “manga” in Japan and the word conjures up a different idea — print cartoons, but also comics offering entertainment as well as serious educational information. Indeed, manga is a major part of the Japanese publishing industry and is working its way west.

Manga has been around for several decades and became more prevalent after World War II. According to some estimates, it makes up approximately a quarter of all printed material in Japan, and it’s not just comics like “Archie” or “Spiderman” in the United States. Manga magazines are considered graphic novels and are split into different categories including action, education, erotica, fashion and kids.

An emerging trend in the Western world, manga may play a significant role in training in the future. The genre has particular appeal to generations X and Y, audiences with lower reading levels, students with a preference for visual learning and time-constrained individuals.

According to manga critic and researcher Natsume Fusanosuke, the form developed in conjunction with television and achieved commercial success due to its interlocking relationship with other media such as television, animation and video games.

In manga, illustrations are mixed with text to tell a story or explain something and are printed in black-and-white art. The story line is epic and writing is typically done in reverse (back to front). Magazines may be as large as telephone books, and the style has its own genre of icons and symbols (e.g., speed lines, sweat drops and even nosebleeds). Generally speaking, the characters are young, hip, cute and sport oversized glossy eyes.

There are a few types of manga, including cartoon manga, where one picture stands alone; story manga, where a series of frames tell a story; and animated manga, (anime) where illustrations and text are animated.

Manga in Japan

In Japan, there is manga for every conceivable subject, including business strategy, economics and politics, as well as serious literature, including Jane Austen’s English classic *Emma*. Intellectual interests are not the only content covered by manga. There are manga for every conceivable hobby, including fishing, restaurant guides and baseball. Anime (animated manga) is on television, including an infomercial on the importance of paying taxes and how tax money is spent.

It’s also finding a home on mobile phones. Each day, mobile phone users receive an installment of an ongoing story. Couple this with the fact that, according

to a survey by the Mainichi Shinbum newspaper, 86 percent of Japanese female high school students read cell phone novels and you get a better sense of manga’s prevalence in Japan.

The stigma associated with comic books in the West doesn’t exist in Japan, where manga is accepted as a normal source of entertainment for all ages. It exists in many forms in weekly and monthly publications that are distributed as regularly as some American magazines. Indeed, one manga publication may sell 2.6 million copies per week. Readers can also get manga in every convenience store or train station kiosk.

Manga is widely used and accepted in Japan as entertainment, but also as a viable source of information for all ages. Some manga is used for education, where it proves to be a good means to make people interested and help them understand difficult topics, like the economy or politics.

Emerging Trend

The manga industry has grown steadily over the last few years and has spread to other countries, where it is used by corporations to advertise products, services, programs and slogans. Manga is often used for advertising in France, where several manga books and anime have been translated into French. Manga has also become increasingly popular in the United Kingdom.

“Anime (cartoons) and manga (comics) have long been circulating the markets in Europe, America and Asia, but never have they been so addictive and popular in the U.K. until the past three years,” wrote Asian trend watcher Barry Crisp in an article titled “Anime Invasion — UK Anime and Manga Tsunami” on the Web site UniOrb.com.

Manga is also showing up in American universities. Dan Pink, author of the New York Times bestsellers *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* and *Free Agent Nation: The Future of Working for Yourself*, wrote on his Web site that Stanford University offered a writing course called “The Graphic Novel,” in which 14 students worked together to complete a 224-page book, *Shake Girl*, about the aftermath of an acid attack. Pink also noted that the U.S. Navy distributed 30,000 copies of its own manga in Japan in preparation for the arrival of an aircraft carrier. The book’s goal was to ease tensions and get out a positive message about the U.S. military presence there.

The United States saw its first business-career book written in manga last year with Pink’s book, *The*

DATA POINT

Eighty-six percent of Japanese female high school students read cell phone novels.

Source: Mainichi Shinbum newspaper.

IN PRACTICE MANGA DESIGN TIPS AND HINTS

In an article on ASTD's Learning Circuits, titled "Character Simulations Make E-Learning Come Alive," writer Jennifer Devries suggested three roles for people doing instruction in online learning:

- **Peer:** The role of a peer to instruct or coach.
- **Expert:** The role of an expert to instruct.
- **Authority Figure:** The character is a boss.

The same should hold true when developing a manga character:

- Create life-like characters. Consider characteristics such as clothing style, speech and idioms, and hairstyle.
- Plan the scenes prior to development. Storyboarding techniques can be helpful in the planning process.
- Check for understanding: Present common situations and questions to gauge learners' comprehension.
- Focus on learning objectives: Get to the point and do not let a character's features and functions distract you.

- Consider a multiskilled team: instructional designer, writer, manga artist.
- Run a pilot: As with all training programs and materials, run a pilot of the newly created manga to see if the audience gets the message and that objectives are realized.

When using manga as part of a learning solution, consider these tips:

- Pilot the manga characters to ensure the audience will like and accept them. In other words, ensure learners can relate to the characters.
- Remember that manga requires the ability to draw and convey a message or story. Typical training departments may need to hire or contract with manga artists; this style of writing is not something that instructional designers can pull together for a one-off project. [CLO](#)

— Allison A.S. Wimms and Zane L. Berge

Adventures of Johnny Bunko: The Last Career Guide You'll Ever Need. A *Forbes* reviewer wrote, "Hard-hitting and informative yet bursting with optimism ... Pink has a knack for teaching in such an entertaining way that you'll forget you are learning."

Manga is becoming accepted in several markets and industries as a viable means of education, entertainment and communication, and we are seeing early signs of its acceptance in the United States.

A Place in Training

As noted above, manga has found its way into education and learning in Japan, where it is used to teach and help explain subjects to the general population. Although manga may stand on its own as a training deliverable, perhaps it is more practical to envision it as part of a blended learning solution, at least as it first enters the American learning industry.

The benefits of blended learning solutions can be many. Blended learning offers participants several options to learn material, reduces training time investment, reaches audiences in generationally diverse populations and often has higher completion rates. According to a 2004 Bersin & Associates study, blended leadership programs have completion rates as high as 75 to 95 percent, as compared to a rate of 20 to 40 percent for stand-alone e-learning courses. Blended learning also capitalizes on the strengths of various training methods, offering the best of several worlds for various lessons.

Indeed, effective blended learning solutions involve a mix of high and low technology. Couple this fact with the likes and dislikes of millennials, and there is a strong case for manga as a viable component of a learning program. Its style of writing has an element of fun

and entertainment that appeals to younger learners, who view games as bona fide instructional tools.

Along those lines, the latest trend in the manga world in Japan is images sent to individuals on a daily basis — sort of Twitter cartoons. A natural transition from entertainment, in this case, may be to education. Imagine a sales organization sending manga images to its sales force on a daily basis to rev-up a new product or slogan. In today's era of instant access to learning, it is not outrageous to consider Twitter as a viable means of delivery. It is not too extreme to imagine manga being sent Twitter-style to disseminate information. Indeed, the Japanese have already tapped this reality.

In a March 2009 article in *T&D* magazine, Jane Hart, a social media and learning consultant, said Twitter and other micro-blogs are useful tools for personal and informal learning. She said instructors can encourage micro-blogging after a course to support relationships among classmates and further learning.

But text alone cannot always meet the mark. Often, learners need illustrations or images to better understand a concept. This takes Twitter a step further, by combining it with manga and developing a state-of-the-art support option that is convenient and expedient and creates true micro-messaging or micro-learning.

In the same article in *T&D*, Sarah Milstein said micro-messaging may soon be as common as e-mail and may replace it for certain kinds of information, such as client and customer relations. That's significant. What else would micro-messaging replace? Or, how else will micro-messaging be used? Is micro-learning on the horizon? Perhaps not as a stand-alone solution, but certainly as part of a blended learning solution.

Manga can be used mobile-learning style to:

- Quickly disseminate information to employees, such as an ad campaign, a reminder of a mission or a word-for-the-day.
- Leverage small pockets of downtime, such as when employees are waiting for airplanes or appointments.
- Reinforce skills taught in the classroom with an image that captures a key concept.
- Generate excitement about upcoming training programs with pre-training messages, teasers or announcements.
- Enhance memory retention by association with manga images that illustrate certain lessons and concepts.

Cartoons, Characters and Animation in Learning

Cartoons are no stranger to the learning industry. Indeed, animation is touted as a significant way to facilitate learning. We see it on television, on the Internet, before movies in the cinema and as part of online learning programs.

Animation immerses the learner in a social experience in which a “person” speaks, interacts and guides learning. And now, as Adobe Flash continues to grow, animation, including manga and anime, is bound to become an even more prevalent part of learning solutions.

Animated characters are a way to gain learners’ attention, and they can drive Web site and program use, which lead to better completion rates. It is not just moving pictures that facilitate learning, it’s pictures in general. For many years, pictures and illustrations have been used to help explain information and intricate instructions. When was the last time you read instructions that were not accompanied by a diagram, illustrations or pictures on how to assemble something?

Animation, cartoons and illustrations are also ideal for those with learning disabilities, lower reading levels and language barriers. In 2004, the National Institute for Literacy reported 30 to 50 percent of the general adult population had an undiagnosed learning disability such as dyslexia or color blindness, not to mention the challenges that come to individuals with lower reading levels. This is a significant percentage which should not be ignored. Learning professionals must create content that appeals to a variety of learning styles and intelligences, and manga can appeal to individuals with lower reading levels and even color blindness.

There are many benefits to using manga: impact on the young, lack of intimidation, reaching those with lower reading levels, Twitter application, attraction to those with English a second language, incorporating diversity and overcoming cross-cultural boundaries, and the overall concept that a picture paints a thousand words. In addition, most students accept, watch

or read manga on their own, placing manga in a position to provide informal learning possibilities as well.

In her article on Suite101.com, “Using Manga Comics in Education,” Helen McCarthy points out other potential benefits:

- Manga can enthuse and involve pupils.
- It is less intimidating than books.
- The fun quotient is higher.
- There are fewer words.
- Grammar and syntax are often simpler, making it ideal for lower reading levels.
- It is easy to translate into other languages, making it ideal for global organizations.
- As part of a blended learning solution, it can make lessons more effective.

DATA POINT

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Source: National Institute for Literacy

These are intriguing applications and ideas, but learning practitioners need to exercise common sense when implementing manga. The audience must be known, a good artist must be found, content needs to be written in a way to meet objectives and sound instructional design practices must be used.

Manga is used as an effective means to disseminate information to Japanese citizens, and the learning industry holds research-based information on the impact of art and visuals in education. Yet, a review of the current English-language literature found no research or evaluation specific to manga in training and education.

Manga offers many benefits, not the least of which are its appeal to generations X and Y, its attraction as a global sensation, the possibilities it offers via mobile learning, its ability to reach learners with lower reading levels, its natural stance as an informal learning tool, its appeal to the visual learner and its creative, fun characteristics. The questions are: Is it possible that manga may someday soon be accepted in the United States as a way to deliver factual information? Will manga one day be viewed as an effective learning method? The answer is likely yes. **CLIO**

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