

Learning classical epics through comics. A Visual Education experience in secondary school

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Abstract: Contemporary schools are undergoing a process of profound change, called upon to rethink the languages, methodologies and aims of learning in a cultural context dominated by the pervasiveness of visual and digital media. In this scenario, education can no longer be understood as the mere transmission of content, but as an experience of connection and construction of meaning within complex cognitive ecosystems, in which words and images contribute to the formation of knowledge. Visual Education thus takes the form of a pedagogical and cognitive perspective capable of integrating perceptual, emotional and symbolic dimensions and enhancing the multimodal nature of learning processes. The teaching experience presented here, carried out in a first-year high school class, involved reading and analysing comics inspired by Homer's poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, in order to investigate the cognitive and educational potential of visual language in the teaching of classical literature. The methodology, based on guided reading, dialogue-based discussion and metacognitive reflection, highlighted an increase in student motivation and engagement, promoting a more empathetic and participatory approach to narrative content. Comics proved to be a cognitive and relational tool capable of transforming ancient texts into shared experiences, demonstrating how visual languages can redefine the educational relationship within a concept of extended and co-evolutionary cognition.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, schools have become emblematic of an epochal change in the way we conceive of learning, knowledge and communication. The dominance of images — conveyed by digital media, television and social networks — has led to a complete redefinition of cognitive paradigms and cultural practices, generating what many scholars have called a visual culture society (Mitchell, 2005; Ranieri, 2011). In this scenario, the challenge for education is twofold: on the one hand, recognising that visual languages are now one of the main forms of meaning construction; on the other, developing teaching strategies capable of integrating these languages into educational programmes in a critical, conscious and productive way (Calvani, 2016).

As Beccia and Pastore (2017) observe, the so-called “society of images” challenges schools to provide students with the cognitive and interpretative tools necessary to read and understand multimodal texts. Reading competence — in the broad definition proposed by the OECD (2003; 2012) — no longer coincides solely with the decoding of written text, but implies the ability to reflect, compare, connect and

synthesise meanings conveyed through different channels of expression. It follows that reading education must now be transformed into education in the plurality of codes, in which images are no longer mere ornamentation or support for the text, but co-agents in the construction of knowledge.

In this context, Visual Education emerges as a pedagogical approach capable of responding to the communicative complexity of the present. It is based on the idea that learning processes are intrinsically multimodal in nature (Marshall, 2014): the mind learns through perceptual, motor, emotional and symbolic systems that interact synergistically. As a cognitive device, images allow us to exercise observation, inference, categorisation and interpretation skills similar to those activated by verbal language, but they also act on affective and relational dimensions that broaden the educational scope of the cognitive act. The integration of words and images, therefore, not only responds to a need for methodological updating, but also to a precise epistemological framework that redefines the very concept of literacy as expanded, aesthetic and cultural literacy (Burke et al., 2013).

Comics represent one of the privileged fields in which this integration manifests itself. Due to its hybrid and polysemic nature, comics — a “language” rather than a “genre”, as Barbieri (1991; 2009) points out — combine verbal and iconic codes in a process of co-narration that encourages the active participation of the reader, who is forced to fill in the gaps, interpret the ellipses and generate continuity between the panels. This dynamic, which Eisner (2010) describes as “sequential art”, transforms reading into a complex cognitive practice, close to metacognitive reflection and the interactive construction of meaning. In the school context, comics thus take on a symbolic mediation function, allowing students to engage with complex literary or conceptual content through aesthetic and emotional involvement.

In Italy, as shown by Beccia and Pastore (2017), but also by Somà (2022), such experiences have found fertile ground in educational experimentation that combines art, literature and visual languages. The comic book workshop — understood as a space for art integration (Marshall, 2014) — allows for the development of disciplinary and transversal skills, connecting knowledge, creativity and personal reflection. In this perspective, comics become not only a tool for language learning, but also a meeting place for different cognitive forms, where images stimulate verbalisation and words generate new mental images. Somà (2022), analysing the experience of re-writing the Divine Comedy as a comic book, emphasises how the intersemiotic translation from poetic text to visual language produces a significant redefinition of the relationship between author, reader and knowledge, encouraging learners to re-work and personally appropriate the literary text.

Visual Education, therefore, has a dual pedagogical value: on the one hand, as a tool for developing linguistic, aesthetic and cognitive skills; on the other, as a means of inclusion and participation, capable of engaging even the least motivated students or those with different learning styles. In this context, the educational relationship takes the form of a space for the co-construction of meaning, where the teacher acts as a cultural mediator and not just a transmitter of knowledge. From this perspective, the use of comics in the teaching of literature — especially so-called “high” or “classical” literature — becomes an opportunity to overcome cultural and cognitive barriers, laying the foundations for critical reflection on texts and forms of storytelling.

The experience presented here, carried out in a first-year secondary school class, fits perfectly into this context of reflection and experimentation. Through the reading

and analysis of comics inspired by Homer's poems — the Iliad and the Odyssey — the activity aimed to explore the educational potential of visual language in the teaching of classical literature. The use of comics as mediators between the ancient world and contemporary sensibilities made it possible to transform the epic text into an immersive and dialogical experience, in which the narrative dimension was intertwined with the iconic one, stimulating deeper and more participatory processes of understanding in the students. The work, based on guided reading, dialogue and metacognitive reflection, revealed how the use of multimodal languages favours the development of interpretative, aesthetic and critical skills, while promoting motivation and a sense of belonging to a learning community.

It is not, therefore, a question of replacing the literary text with its illustrated version, but of creating a symbolic bridge between words and images, between tradition and modernity, between the mythical past of epic poetry and the visual imagination of young people. In this sense, comics can be considered a form of intersemiotic translation (Eco, 2016) which, far from simplifying the original work, offers new possibilities for reading and interpretation. Just as the *Batracomiomachia*, recalled by Somà (2022), parodied the epic without distorting it, the language of comics allows classical texts to be brought up to date, making them alive and meaningful for new generations. Visual transposition stimulates continuous negotiation between codes, genres and styles, generating learning that is at once cognitive and affective, analytical and creative.

Furthermore, the use of Homeric comics in the classroom is part of national and international educational policies that recognise the centrality of non-verbal and visual languages in contemporary literacy processes. The *Indicazioni Nazionali per il curriculum* (MIUR, 2012; 2018) and European documents on arts education (UNESCO, 2006) emphasise the importance of promoting active and interdisciplinary learning that enhances the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the experience. The comic book workshop, due to its cooperative and process-based structure, fully meets this need: as Beccia (2014) observes, it transforms reading into a social activity, in which students learn not only to interpret but also to produce meaning.

Ultimately, the educational experiment combining classical epic poetry and comics is a concrete example of extended cognition (Morin, 2008), where knowledge no longer resides exclusively in the individual mind, but is constructed within shared relational and symbolic systems. In this sense, the visual approach integrates humanistic knowledge with media and digital skills, restoring literature's value as an experiential space, a dialogue between codes and generations. If, as Eco (2016) writes, translating means “saying almost the same thing”, comics perhaps allow us to “show the same thing differently”: a cognitive gesture that, in an educational context, can become a transformative tool for awareness and participation.

2. The research

The experience presented here is part of studies on Visual Education and multimodal teaching, with the aim of exploring the potential of visual language, and in particular comics, as a cognitive and emotional mediator in the learning processes of classical literature. The project was based on the theoretical assumption that contemporary schools, immersed in a cultural ecosystem dominated by visual and digital media, can no longer consider images as accessories, but as an integral part of the

knowledge-building process (Rivoltella, 2020; Previtali, 2021). This belief is based on a long tradition of studies which, from dual coding theory (Paivio, 1990) to more recent research on multimodal learning, have highlighted how the combination of verbal and iconic channels promotes deep understanding, memorisation and intrinsic motivation.

The research aims in particular to verify how the experience of reading and analysing comics inspired by Homeric poems, integrated with the reading of selected passages from the Iliad and the Odyssey, can contribute to the development of interpretative and reflective skills in learners and to a renewed relationship with poetic language. At an epistemological level, the experience lies at the intersection of literary education, media education and sequential art pedagogy (Beccia & Pastore, 2017; Somà, 2022), investigating not only the educational value of the visual text, but also its relational, affective and metacognitive implications. The basic assumption is that comics, as a hybrid language, can be configured as a cognitive and relational device (Rivoltella & Rossi, 2019), capable of transforming ancient texts into shared and dialogical experiences, redefining the educational relationship within a perspective of extended and co-evolutionary cognition (Morin, 2008).

2.1. Context

The experiment was conducted in a first-year humanities class at a secondary school. From an educational point of view, the class was quite heterogeneous in terms of linguistic preparation and interpretative skills; many students said they perceived classical literature as distant, difficult or disconnected from real life. In particular, reading Homeric epic texts was difficult, both because of the linguistic distance and the complexity of the moral and symbolic content, which was especially unwelcoming to students with Special Educational Needs.

This scenario led to the choice of a multimodal teaching strategy, centred on the use of comics as a tool for accessing and empathically understanding the characters and values of the epic. The approach, fully consistent with the principles of Visual Education (Troia, 2018), aimed to overcome the traditional transmissive logic, orienting the class towards a dimension of collective construction of meaning. The activity was designed to be inclusive, allowing all students to participate according to their expressive potential, with the aim of promoting the relational and motivational well-being of the entire group.

2.2. Participants

Twenty-four students participated in the experiment, characterised by varying levels of linguistic and cultural competence. The group included a student with Special Educational Needs, who had learning difficulties but a marked aptitude for drawing. This heterogeneity of profiles made the sample particularly significant for observing the inclusive potential of visual teaching.

Overall, the students showed limited interest in the canonical reading of epic texts. During an initial brainstorming phase, over 70% of the group stated that they had never read a classical poem in its entirety, while almost all of them were familiar, albeit superficially, with visual narrative languages, such as comics or cinema. This

prior competence in decoding forms of visual communication became a starting point for cultural capital on which to base the teaching design.

The entire programme was conducted with the collaboration of a literature teacher and a support teacher, who made systematic observations on participation dynamics, the quality of interactions and behavioural changes that emerged over time. The presence of the student with Special Educational Needs made it possible to specifically document the inclusive and cooperative dimension of the intervention, highlighting how Visual Education can also take on a role of personal empowerment, promoting the enhancement of individual skills within the class group.

2.3. Methodology

The research followed a qualitative exploratory-descriptive design, focused on observing processes rather than measuring quantitative variables. The programme lasted six weeks, for a total of about twelve hours divided between integrated lessons, reading workshops, circle time and creative production.

In the first, introductory phase, the students addressed some of the thematic and linguistic issues of Homer's poems through the reading of selected passages, with particular attention to the episodes of Achilles' wrath and Ulysses' return. This allowed for an initial comparison between the image of the ancient hero and that of modern man, introducing the concepts of hubris, destiny, courage, limits and loyalty.

The second phase involved reading and analysing comics inspired by the Iliad and the Odyssey, namely the Disney adaptations of *Topodissea* and *Paperiade* from the special editions for RBA, which also feature quotations from Homer's original text in the version by Rosa Calzecchi Onesti and Vincenzo Monti. The class collectively examined the graphic choices, dialogues, scene selection and character construction. By comparing the comics with the poetic text, the students were guided to recognise the differences between verbal and iconic language, understanding how the drawing and editing of the vignettes can convey complex concepts — emotions, tensions, values, moral dilemmas — with a synthetic force that is alternative but complementary to the written word.

The third phase, focused on circle time, was the reflective heart of the project: in a dialogue-based and egalitarian atmosphere, the students expressed their experiences, interpretations and analogies with their own daily lives, reworking the figures of Achilles, Hector, Ulysses and Penelope. The teachers took on the role of facilitators, stimulating discussion and helping the group to intertwine literary analysis with the emotional dimension. In this space, over 90% of the pupils spoke at least once, reducing the passivity that usually emerges in frontal lessons.

Finally, the creative production phase transformed the class into a small sequential art workshop: divided into micro-groups, the students created original illustrations reinterpreting a Homeric episode in a contemporary key, using manual and digital techniques. The student with SEN took on the task of creating the background drawings, with positive results in terms of both her self-esteem and her perception of her role in the group. The final assignment consisted of a short written reflection, in which each student explained their narrative and graphic choices and the values they intended to express.

3. Results

The analysis of observations made during and after the trial period identified a series of emerging categories that can be grouped into two main macro-dimensions: on the one hand, the cognitive and motivational effectiveness of the multimodal approach; on the other, its impact on relational dynamics and the socio-emotional inclusion of the class group. Firstly, there was a significant increase in intrinsic motivation and attention. The triangulation of observational data and verbal feedback collected during the two circle times led by the teachers showed more consistent and engaged participation compared to traditional methods of reading epic texts, resulting in greater continuity of commitment, an increase in spontaneous interventions and an overall improvement in the classroom atmosphere, which became progressively more relaxed, cooperative and participatory. The interaction between verbal and visual codes acted as a cognitive facilitator, reducing the mental load associated with understanding the more complex passages and facilitating access to symbolic and emotional content. The iconic component stimulated processes of identification and deeper decoding of the characters' affective language, allowing students to perceive the events represented as closer to their own experience. This evidence is consistent with cognitive theories that attribute a compensatory role to multimodality in the construction of meaning (Paivio, 1991), suggesting that visual narration, in the literary context, acts as an integrative mediator between aesthetic representation and personal processing. At the same time, an increase in narrative empathy and symbolic interpretation skills was observed: the materials collected and the reflections that emerged during circle time reveal a tendency to humanise the epic protagonists, reinterpreting them in an existential and contemporary key. Achilles has been reconfigured as a figure marked by inner tensions related to anger management and emotional control, while Ulysses has been perceived as a symbol of resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity, rather than mere cunning. These interpretations, the result of collective and dialogical elaboration, show a process of reconfiguring the concept of heroism, redefined by the students in terms of ethical consistency, everyday courage and the ability to face real difficulties, rather than fame or exceptionality. This semantic decentralisation testifies to an active negotiation of meaning, consistent with a constructivist paradigm of situated learning. On a cognitive level, written tests and re-writing activities highlighted progress in the symbolic and chronological structuring of narrative events, as well as a more conscious competence in the use of poetic language. The final productions reveal a greater ability to select relevant information, establish causal relationships and develop coherent and reasoned interpretations. These results suggest that the use of the visual channel contributed to the development of metacognitive skills, stimulating reflection on the process of textual comprehension and production itself. The multimodal approach, therefore, not only facilitated communication but also acted as a device for cognitive transformation, promoting reflexivity and conceptual generalisation. The relational dimension also showed significant results. The student with Special Educational Needs actively participated in all phases, demonstrating increased organisational autonomy and greater confidence in task management. Cooperative activities encouraged the emergence of spontaneous forms of peer tutoring, contributing to the construction of a widespread support network and the reduction of operational inequalities between students with different levels of performance. The shared working environment gradually transformed into a participatory learning space, in which diversity was recognised as a

resource rather than an obstacle. The relational climate indicators that emerged from systematic observations showed an increase in mutual trust, communicative participation and respect for different modes of expression, confirming what had already been highlighted by international studies that interpret Visual Education as a cognitive and relational device capable of generating fair, cooperative and motivating learning environments (Hall et al., 2012; Hidayat et al., 2020).

Some critical positions, however, introduced elements of metacognitive reflection: a minority of students expressed concern that comics, while promoting understanding, can sometimes oversimplify or attenuate the symbolic density of poetic text. This observation, which emerged and was explored in depth during the final circle time, was discussed collectively in light of the distinction between mediation and trivialisation, leading to a mature reflection on the role of the teacher as guarantor of the linguistic and semantic complexity of the original work. This reflective phase was interpreted as an indicator of critical and conscious growth, signalling a shift from passive aesthetic enjoyment to an active and reasoned understanding of the processes of cultural mediation.

Overall, more than 85% of the class group expressed a positive assessment of the experience during circle time, acknowledging that they had acquired new ways of reading and representing literary texts and had reworked their perception of literature as living, experiential and contemporary knowledge. Taken together, these results suggest that the use of visual education applied to classical literature can be configured as a transformative learning environment, capable of integrating cognitive development, emotional awareness and socio-educational inclusion. From a theoretical point of view, the evidence gathered confirms that Visual Education does not simply act as a formal support for accessibility, but as a process of dialogical re-signification capable of intertwining languages, identities and relationships in a consistently multimodal pedagogical framework.

4. Discussion

The results achieved confirm the research hypotheses and are in line with the reference literature, which identifies visual language as a privileged educational space for the integration of cognition and emotion (Beccia & Pastore, 2017; Troia, 2018; Rivoltella, 2020). From a pedagogical point of view, experience shows that Visual Education is not simply a methodology, but an epistemic paradigm based on the idea that knowledge is constructed through a multiplicity of expressive codes. In this perspective, images not only facilitate understanding, but also become a place for thought, a space for symbolic negotiation, and an opportunity for languages and subjectivities to meet.

From a cognitive point of view, empirical evidence confirms the validity of dual coding (Paivio, 1990) and cognitive load (Sweller, 2011) theories: the simultaneous combination of visual and textual channels made learning more fluid and sustainable, allowing students with different profiles to operate on common ground. From a relational point of view, the cooperative dynamics and extensive participation during circle time generated a discursive learning community, in which literary language circulated as a shared asset rather than an elitist heritage.

In the comic strip, the myth was translated into contemporary images and impulses, becoming a mirror of universal existential questions: anger, courage, fear, hope. The heroic character, graphically reinterpreted by the students, became a

symbolic figure of a new form of everyday ethics, made up of responsibility, commitment and cooperation. In this sense, the project not only renewed the teaching of epic poetry, but also allowed for reflection on identity, citizenship and the value of storytelling as a practice of thought.

In essence, experience has shown that comics as an educational tool allow us to rethink the teaching of literature in a dialogical, inclusive and affective way. Images become a bridge between eras and sensibilities, through which students can recognise themselves in the great archetypes of the past and, at the same time, reclaim their right to be readers, authors and interpreters. The learning process has thus been transformed into a cognitively extended and relationally meaningful experience, in which the memory of the ancient has found a new form of life in the visual language of the present.

5. Conclusions

The teaching experience described clearly confirmed how the integration of words and images, and more specifically the use of comics as a multimodal language, can be a powerful tool for bringing students closer to classical literature, restoring its vitality, meaning and engagement. The teaching of Homeric epic poetry, traditionally perceived as arduous and distant, has been transformed into a living terrain, traversed by emotions, discoveries and relationships: the class has become a micro-interpretative community that has recognised myth not as a relic of the past, but as a narrative device for understanding humanity.

The visual adaptation of the epic text has reduced linguistic and cognitive barriers, promoting what Rivoltella (2020) defines as the ecology of languages, in which every code — verbal, iconic, bodily — contributes to the construction of meaning. The students participated with increasing engagement, demonstrating that the aesthetic and narrative dimension of the image can generate cognitive empathy, sustaining motivation and promoting self-regulation of learning processes. The experience showed that motivation does not derive solely from the playful pleasure of the activity, but from the sense of competence and effectiveness perceived in being able to understand, translate and reinvent such a complex text.

In this regard, the role of the teacher as a reflective mediator and key figure in the construction of teaching self-efficacy emerges strongly. The process has led teachers to experience first-hand a renegotiation of their role, shifting from transmitters of content to directors of experiences and facilitators of cognitive and relational processes. This transformation, consistent with the constructivist and socio-cognitive approach (Bandura, 1997), involves a profound redefinition of the concept of effectiveness: no longer as control of performance, but as the ability to stimulate authentic, intentional and cooperative learning in students.

During the activity, the teacher experienced a growing sense of professional self-efficacy, deriving from positive feedback from students, the quality of dialogue and the perception of being able to have a real impact on the interest and understanding of the class group. The opportunity to observe tangible progress — in attention, motivation and the ability to critically read images — fuelled confidence in their pedagogical and methodological skills, reinforcing the “confidence” that, according to socio-cognitive theory, is the main predictor of teaching quality (Bandura, 2018). In other words, the success of Visual Education is not only about student

learning, but also about the professional empowerment of teachers, who find concrete proof of their educational effectiveness in their creativity and mediation skills.

At a systemic level, the experience contributes to the development of a multi-modal and relational teaching model, in which knowledge is built through cooperation, interaction between codes and shared reflection. Images do not replace words, but broaden their interpretative scope; comics do not trivialise literature, but make it accessible and reflective; and teachers do not abdicate their role, but renew its function, ensuring transformative and inclusive learning.

The results of the project also highlight the inclusive value of visual language: the possibility of learning through different channels has also allowed pupils with specific difficulties to succeed, feel part of the group and contribute to the shared success of the collective product. Comics, in their dual nature of storytelling and art, have made it possible to develop not only knowledge but also socio-emotional skills such as collaboration, empathy and affective regulation.

From a broader perspective, the intervention can be considered a small laboratory for teaching complexity (Morin, 2008): by engaging with the intertwining of languages and meanings, the students underwent an experience of integrated thinking, in which analysis merged with creativity and critical reflection with production. The understanding of Homer's text no longer took place solely on a linguistic level, but also on an experiential, aesthetic and symbolic level.

The project also demonstrated how Visual Education can be a source of continuous training for teachers themselves: experimenting with new languages and participatory strategies requires a willingness to get involved, methodological flexibility and the ability to learn from the context. This openness has a feedback effect on perceived self-efficacy: feeling that students are learning and getting excited thanks to one's own intervention renews the teacher's confidence in the possibility of transforming their practice and having a positive impact on learners.

In summary, experience confirms that visual education is not only an innovative methodology, but also a pedagogical approach that focuses on relationships, creativity and the shared construction of meaning. Comics, as a language that integrates words and images, have shown that they can broaden the boundaries of literary teaching, acting as a bridge between past and present, between written culture and visual culture, between teacher and student.

In an age dominated by iconic and algorithmic flows, training the eye means training critical thinking and cognitive responsibility. Teachers who embrace this perspective not only renew their practice but also strengthen their educational self-efficacy, becoming concrete witnesses to an idea of school capable of thinking, creating and interpreting together — with words and images — the complexity of the world.

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