**Superhero Matinee:** Comics Used As Examples of Intellectual Property Concepts

Teaching children and teens about intellectual property concepts is often a challenge. John Schlipp and Linda Kocis have been working with children’s librarians, teen librarians, school librarians, and other educators with many types of intellectual property awareness programs. After conducting successful kids’ inventor science patent programs, we were searching for ways to include other intellectual properties, such as trademark and copyright associated with music, arts and humanities, and even entrepreneurship. These programs included activities and presentations at *InventorFest* [http://ptrca.org/journal/2007schlipp](http://ptrca.org/journal/2007schlipp) and for copyright and plagiarism awareness curriculums such as our *Creative Thinking* program located online at [http://creativethinking.nku.edu/teachersguide/bookdiscussions.html](http://creativethinking.nku.edu/teachersguide/bookdiscussions.html). Before the Superhero program, John and Linda presented an engaging book discussion workshop for a Cincinnati regional middle school *BookFest* at NKU; [http://artscience.nku.edu/departments/english/outreach/bookfest.html](http://artscience.nku.edu/departments/english/outreach/bookfest.html). The popular “tween” novels *Masterpiece* and *Scumble* were used to engage students to analyze the creativity of these books’ characters. Students proactively explored research skills, including synthesis, while learning to respect others’ intellectual works.

As a follow-up, the same pedagogical approach was applied to a history of superhero comics series for the Power Up for Summer Reading program at the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County (OH) in 2013. We introduced how intellectual properties were associated with the concept of superhero characters and their authors and artists. Our initial target audience (advertised in the promotional messages) was for ages 6-12. The promotional flyers avoided any clip art of proprietary superhero images, only using generic artwork. After our first round of presentations, we discovered that the content presented was better received by 8-12 year-old children. Later, John adapted the program for teens and adult audiences.

We collaborated with branch libraries in both the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County (OH), and the Kenton County Public Library (KY) systems. The branch libraries handled all of the publicity and venue set up, including displaying related-topic books onsite to supplement our program presentation content. We asked the branch librarians to have plenty of paper, crayons, pencils, felt-tipped markers, etc. for children to create their own artwork or stories. We prepared a visually engaging powerpoint presentation to support our topic, as well as displayed a few superhero cartoon clips from YouTube® to supplement our talk. This was especially important for the younger attendees. We displayed short 6-to-12 minute film clips that were authorized promotional presentations from the studios representing D.C. and/or Marvel Comics. In instances when there were internet connection issues, we displayed short Fair Use portions of a few superhero cartoons from commercial anthology DVDs. We avoided displaying any questionable content.
clips that could potentially infringe copyright. We also found perfectly fitting film clips from YouTube® that provided instruction on “how-to” draw a superhero. We supplemented this drawing instruction with a few “How to Draw Superhero” books or educational webpages. To celebrate the 75th Anniversary of Superman and its Cleveland origins, the Cleveland Public Library provided us with their own Superman crossword puzzle and trivia sheet that we distributed at the venue for older teens and adults. Additionally, a local comic bookshop retailer co-presented with John at the older teen- and adult-audience venue. The retailer was able to bring along plenty of free sample comic books and memorabilia for attendees. Linda and John plan to present this program at the Cincinnati Library’s Second Annual ComicCon series, as well as the forthcoming iMAGiNExpo.

NOTICE: Most comic book superheroes displayed here are the intellectual properties of Marvel and DC. Images displayed in this presentation are utilized as Fair Use in a PLCH educational children’s program.

Slide Presentation Outline Overview

We started the program by detailing the history of comics, showing examples from older comics and using a few short videos from YouTube®. (About 15 minutes)

Then we introduced Intellectual Property concepts of copyright, patent and trademark and applied these concepts to the superheroes and their creators. (About 15 minutes)

Then we asked the participants to create their own superheroes: what special powers will you give them? Will s/he use any gadgets (you can create anything). Give your superhero a name, too! Then we shared these creations with the group. And we reminded people, you are now the copyright holder of your superhero drawing! (about 30 minutes)

Then we shared books and videos about superheroes with the crowd for further discussion to tie our use of videos to pedagogy of IP educational aspects of the workshop. (About 10 minutes)

Slides for the teen/adult audience included additional copyright and trademark background related to superhero artists, writers, publishers, and media producers. Drawing and writing tips from various instructional books and videos were highlighted.

Observations and Feedback from the Children during the Slide Presentation

Question and answer sessions were VERY popular for discussing the superhero characters, e.g. Marvel versus D.C.; villains associated with specific heroes; gadgets and gismos of superheroes, etc. In particular, the younger kids were extremely enthusiastic to answer questions posed about the various attributes of the characters and which superheroes were their favorites.
Besides Superman and Wonder Woman, Batman was among the most popular D.C. characters discussed. Spider-Man was the more popular Marvel character. Attendees were surprised to learn how old the publishing origins were of the initial D.C. characters, around the year 1939. It amazed them to learn of the same year for the classic MGM film the *Wizard of Oz*, which also led to the discussion of book adaptations of films and television programs. This helped prepare them for the copyright and authorship topic.

When authors and artists were discussed in more detail, students were very engaged to chat about the IP concepts to protect their creative works. We tied it to their own original drawings, poems, superhero gadgets or costumes, etc. We demonstrated the use of drawing a © symbol. This led to the concept of originality and the characterization of copycats as literary villains. We defined copyright, trademarks, and patents next. Trademarks were associated with the Marvel and D.C. brands and characters. We displayed Design Patent 329,321 from the year 1992 for the Batman Head Dress from the Hollywood blockbuster series.

We then asked the participants to draw their own superheroes or fan favorite interpretations of the characters they liked. Students were very excited to create their own drawings and some even wrote short stories and poems. A few invented unique super gadgets too. When they were ready, students shared their works of art with others. An onsite popularity poll was implemented where everyone applauded when each child presented and described their work in front of the others. A grand-prize winner was announced (based upon the applause level) and everyone received motivational adhesive WOW-type stickers. Instructional coloring and drawing sheets were provided when kids needed inspiration or ideas.
Multiple children’s librarians participating noticed that although the younger kids might not have fully understood the concept of intellectual property, they felt that the seed concept had been planted. For example, they understood the authorship tied to ownership concept and that copycats were dishonest and wrong.

Future plans? The iMAGiNExpo plans to showcase the intellectual research works of some of the best regional creative student minds at a free mini-convention that spotlights and supports creativity and innovation from inventors to musicians. Or perhaps, a children’s or teen’s Intellectual Property Summer Boot Camp partnership with NKU’s college Entrepreneur or Science programs. John Schlipp and Linda Kocis continue to think of new ways with community partners to further the civic outreach of our PTRCs.

**Additional Resources and References**


Suess, Jeff. “Superman created by Cleveland duo: Man of Steel debuted in comics 75 years ago.” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Sunday, April 28, 2013: B7.


Also, see the foundation of our presentation and activity based upon exercises from *Novels for Students: presenting analysis, context and criticism on commonly studied novels*, Volume 25, (Thomson Gale, 2007), page 11, lesson planner utilizing the *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. 