

What is the population distribution of cartoon characters living on the pages of YOUR newspaper?

By Jeff Gentile

GEOGRAPHIC QUESTION: Can traditional geographic mapping and data organization strategies be used to map the geography of nontraditional terrains and what can students learn by comparing the comics page data to local, regional, and/or national demographic or population data of the United States?

Overview: Students will explore and analyze the “landscape” of the comics pages of the local daily newspaper to determine the population demographics, spatial distribution, and grouping of the cartoon character inhabitants. Using their knowledge of traditional population distribution maps, students will create variously themed population distribution maps based on their observations of the day’s cartoon pages. This lesson, while somewhat unorthodox, will help students recognize both how traditional population maps can be created and what the information these maps can tell us, depending on the theme. Once students have gained data from their study of the newspaper comics pages, students can study census data on local, regional or national population statistics and try to analyze or glean meaning from the comparisons.

Connection With Curriculum:

ODE Common Curriculum Goal Standard for Geography: Use maps to organize information about people, places, and environment in a special context.

ODE Geography Content Standard: Read, interpret and make maps, charts and graphs to explain spatial relationships.

ODE Grade 8 Benchmark: Identify the location of key physical and cultural features on maps and globes to answer geographic questions.

National Geography Standard #1 ___How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective

National Geography Standard #2 ___How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context

Objectives:

Students will:

- a. compile data on character populations of a comics section and correctly map human, animal, youth, adult, and racial distributions on the pages.
- b. come to realize that maps do not always have to derive from a traditional source (i.e. the land and its characteristics outside of the classroom).
- c. be able to appreciate how gathering information from even something as innocuous as a comics page can tell us something about our culture.

Vocabulary:

anthropomorphism, demographics, census, data, polls, target audiences

Materials:

- copies of the daily newspaper for every student (this may vary according to availability)
- grid sheets
- colored pencils or crayons
- census or population information from the U.S. census bureau or from newspaper articles that frequently appear in local newspapers (for second phase of this lesson, making comparisons to data gleaned from comics pages to demographic information of a city, region, or the nation).

Pre Knowledge:

During the course of the year, my students will already have experienced and worked with various types of bar, chart, pie and other visual data graphs. Otherwise, various aspects of this assignment, while seemingly fun, may be too complex and difficult for students. If it is possible, teachers should try to procure a newspaper article on the implications of shifts or changes in population demographics in cities, states or regions. Local newspaper online archives, Electric Library or EBSCO searches are likely to turn up potential articles, as well as general internet searches.

Procedure:

1. Begin by handing out a copy of the day's newspaper to every student. Instruct students that today's silent reading time will be to read the newspaper and find out what's going on in the world around us (20-30 minutes). Then, just as everyone is about to settle in, instruct the students to remove the Living section and turn it in to the teacher. Tell students they'll get to read this section later.
2. After silent reading ask students to share news that they have gained from their reading. Make sure to ask which section that the news came from. Discuss what kind of news the person focused on and why it is important to know. Finally, ask student what they can learn about ourselves and the world around us by reading the comics section. Is it just for fun or can we tell anything about ourselves by reading the comic strips?
2. Then ask students if you can map a comics section. After either discussion or confusion, tell students that this is just what we will be trying to do today.
3. Inform students that they'll be collecting data on the demographics of the characters on the comics pages. Explain what "demographics" means and show several maps with demographic themes.
4. Hand back the Living section and begin to model the first demographic map -- distribution of animal and human populations on the pages. Point out that since the pages have a sort of combined rectangular shape, that will be the shape of this particular map. Have the students call out what the first steps are, which is (1) to give the map a title, including a date; and (2) decide on the color coding and make a key for this map. For good measure, add a copyright notice, just in case anyone decides to publish your map.
5. Begin studying the comics page and filling in the grid map according to whether or not it is populated by animal characters or human characters. When you come to a space without comics (such as the horoscope), decide upon another color or pattern to indicate that there is a zero population zone.

6. Continue to work on animals/humans population distribution map either by having students call out the color or coming up to fill in the next part of the grid.
7. Once this map is complete, ask students if people really make and use maps like this (yes, because I'd have modelled some variations earlier). Ask who might use a map like this? What might a map like this be used for? Answers can vary from advertisers to politicians to real estate agents to others.
8. Next have students get into groups of two or three and create the following maps: (number of maps may vary depending on time of lesson)
 - * A second color coded population distribution map, this time indicating the density of population in each strip. Color categories will be (a) 1-2 inhabitants; (b) 3-5 inhabitants; and (c) 6 or more inhabitants in a strip.
 - * A pie graph depicting the breakdown between human racial population groups represented on these comics pages.
 - * A bar graph that indicates the number of humans compared to the number of animals.
 - * A second color coded population distribution map, this time indicating the distribution of human characters by age (youth- 4-11/teen/adult). Decide on a system for dealing with mixed age strips.
 - * A pie graph comparing the differences between the total population of humans versus the total population of animal characters.
9. Share and discuss findings and maps. Discuss purpose of these type of maps and what they can be used for.

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on

- (1) accuracy of maps as prescribed according to the instructions, including map elements such as titles, keys and, in this case, dates
- (2) participation and effort during oral discussions

Extensions:

1. Gather comic strips pages from other cities in or out of state and create comparison maps.
2. Write to newspaper with findings and suggestions (if students have any).
3. Write letters to the editor commenting on the editors choices and layout of the land.
4. After reading an article or several articles on race and marketing, students might be asked to write a persuasive letter regarding better practices on the part of newspapers, or tv or advertisers.