

Beyond the Textbook: Using Comic Strips to Teach Business Law to Non-Law Students

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ABSTRACT

Teaching Business Law to non-law students presents several challenges due to the nature of the subject which involves abstract concepts, complex terminology and students' perception that the subject lacks relevance to their field. Traditional lecture-based approaches alone may be insufficient to sustain engagement or to assist their understanding of the complexities of business law. Hence, this article aims to explore the use of comic strips as a visual -narrative teaching tool to compliment the traditional lecture-based method. Using Dual Coding Theory (DCT) and Constructivist Approaches, it examines how comic may simplify the teaching of legal concepts, demonstrate the application of the legal principle in practice and accommodate diverse learning styles. The study involved 16 Business and Management students who had previously failed the course and the results showed improvement in their academic performance which provide preliminary evidence that the use of comic strip alongside conventional teaching may support the learning of Business Law among non-law students. The findings, however, should be interpreted as exploratory instead of causal because of the small, purposively defined sample and the absence of a controlled group. The study emphasised the potential of a meticulously designed multimodal teaching tools to make complex legal concepts more accessible while maintaining the accuracy of legal doctrine and the structural approach of legal analysis.

Keywords: Business Law, comic strips, visual learning, non-law students, innovative multimodal tools, student performance

INTRODUCTION

Lecture-based delivery is the most adopted method for teaching law. This traditional approach is valued for its structured presentation and comprehensive coverage of legal doctrines and principles. Typically, the lecturer assumes an active role in transmitting knowledge through the explanation of legal concepts, case law, and statutory interpretation, while students adopt a receptive role, engaging primarily in listening and note-taking. Biggs and Tang (2011) note that lecture-based teaching is effective for building foundational legal knowledge and ensuring content accuracy, particularly in large classroom settings. However, Ramsden (2003) argues that such passive learning environments limit students' opportunities to develop critical thinking and legal reasoning skills. Despite these limitations, Friedland (1996) observed that lecture-centric teaching remains prevalent in legal education due to its efficiency and its ability to convey complex, abstract material that requires expert interpretation and contextualization.

Non law students often perceive legal subject as irrelevant, abstract, and disconnected from their academic specialisation (de Silva & Cowap, 2007; Kariyawasam & Low, 2014; Razak et al., 2020). The complexity of legal doctrines and the unfamiliarity of legal terminology can make law an intimidating subject (Khan, 2021;

Kariyawasam & Low, 2014). As a result, traditional teaching methods may fail to sustain students' interest or encourage active participation in class, thereby reinforcing passive learning habits (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Ramsden, 2003). This highlights the need for innovative teaching strategies that can stimulate engagement and foster meaningful learning among non-law students.

Although visual learning tools have become increasingly popular in higher education, the use of comic strips remains underexplored in legal education. Much of the existing literature on comic-based learning focuses on STEM fields (Phoon, 2021) or general education contexts (Topkaya et al., 2023). However, Mursolimah, Slamet, and Roemintoyo (2025) suggest that comics represent a promising pedagogical innovation that can capture students' attention and enhance their motivation to learn. By combining images and text within a coherent narrative structure, comics offer an engaging medium for instruction (McCloud, 1993). When used strategically, this approach can help to translate abstract legal rules into relatable, real-world scenarios, thereby improving both understanding and retention (Al Hafidz & Arifin, 2019).

This study aims to explore the effect of using comic strips as a visual and narrative teaching method in a Business Law course. Specifically, it investigates whether students' understanding and engagement with legal concepts improve through the integration of comics as a complementary instructional tool.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dual Coding Theory

Learning is enhanced when information is delivered using both visual and verbal channels—a principle known as Dual Coding Theory (DCT), introduced by Paivio (1986). According to this theory, learners process information more effectively when verbal content is supported by relevant visuals, enabling two simultaneous cognitive pathways for encoding and retrieval.

In legal education—particularly for non-law students—comic strips serve as a promising instructional strategy. The verbal channel presents legal doctrines and principles through text, while the visual channel engages students through illustrated characters and scenes, making abstract legal concepts more tangible. Clark and Paivio (1991) provided a detailed framework emphasizing the role of visual aids in supporting memory and conceptual understanding across educational contexts.

Empirical studies reinforce the pedagogical value of dual coding. For example, Wooten and Cuevas (2024) found significant improvements in vocabulary retention when visuals accompanied text in elementary-level social studies. Likewise, Nelson, Reed, and Walling (1976) demonstrated the pictorial superiority effect, showing that learners remembered images more effectively than text, even when conveying identical content. In the context of law, which requires the recall and application of dense and abstract principles, integrating visual elements through comics may reduce cognitive load and improve accessibility, especially for students who are unfamiliar with legal terminology or formal reasoning structures.

However, DCT is not without its limitations. Sadoski and Paivio (2013) acknowledged that the theory primarily focuses on visual and verbal channels, overlooking critical factors such as prior knowledge, learner motivation, emotional states, and cultural background. Moreover, Sweller (1994) and Mayer (2009) noted that the effectiveness of dual coding depends heavily on the quality of instructional design. Misaligned, overly decorative, or irrelevant visuals may increase extraneous cognitive load, distracting rather than aiding the learner. Levie and Lentz (1982) also cautioned that visual interpretation varies across cultures, potentially leading to inconsistencies in learning outcomes.

While Dual Coding Theory offers a strong pedagogical foundation for integrating comics into legal instruction, it should be applied thoughtfully. Educators must ensure that visual elements are instructionally aligned, culturally appropriate, and supplemented by other cognitive and constructivist learning theories to optimize student engagement and achievement—particularly in complex, non-traditional learning contexts like legal education for non-law students.

Constructivist Approaches

Constructivist learning theory posits that learners acquire knowledge more effectively through active experience, exploration, and reflection, rather than by passively receiving information from the teacher (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Piaget (1972), teaching is most effective when learners are encouraged to build understanding based on their own experiences rather than relying solely on rote memorization. This emphasis on active learning has prompted educators to explore innovative, learner-centered tools such as comics to promote student engagement and deeper conceptual understanding.

The use of comics aligns with constructivism principles because they integrate visual and verbal modes of communication, encouraging learners to interact with content in a meaningful way. Sousa (2011) argued that interpreting the combination of images and text in comics engages higher-order cognitive processes, aligning with the mental demands of constructivist learning. Kurniawan and Nurhadi (2019) found that using comics in science classrooms helped students better understand abstract concepts by situating them in familiar, relatable contexts. Similarly, Fong and Eow (2021) reported that students exposed to comics demonstrated enhanced problem-solving abilities and greater engagement in the learning process. Fosnot (2013) emphasized that learners who construct knowledge through active participation tend to develop stronger comprehension, critical thinking skills, and longer-term retention.

Despite these strengths, constructivist approaches are not without criticism. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) argued that in large classroom settings, direct instruction may be more efficient than constructivist methods, which can be time-consuming, resource-intensive, and difficult to scale. Mayer (2014) also cautioned that students lacking sufficient background knowledge may struggle to meaningfully engage with open-ended, constructivist learning tasks. Taber (2011) further noted that constructivist approaches often assume uniform levels of motivation, self-regulation, and prior experience among learners—assumptions that may not hold true in diverse classrooms unless clear instructional scaffolding and structure are provided.

Constructivist theory provides a powerful framework for student-centered learning, its effectiveness depends on thoughtful implementation with clear guidance, structured support, and consideration of learner variability. When integrated appropriately, tools like comics can serve as valuable resources to foster active learning, critical thinking, and deeper engagement.

Comics in legal education

To make legal education more engaging and less intimidating, educators have increasingly adopted innovative teaching tool, among which comics have emerged as a valuable pedagogical resource. According to Giddens (2012), comics offer an alternative to traditional text-heavy legal instruction by incorporating visual and aesthetic dimensions that support alternative forms of knowledge representation and stimulate reflection on the cultural, ethical, and social dimensions of law. Similarly, Vilaça (2022) emphasized that comics help students understand legal principles, case law, and abstract legal concepts in a more practical and relatable manner, bridging the gap between theory and real-world application. As such, using visual approaches as teaching tools could be particularly suitable to non-law students.

Kariyawasam and Low (2014) found that cultural and linguistic differences are among the challenges faced by the instructors in teaching business law. Poon and Khong (2014) identified the benefits of combining conventional lectures with active problem-based approach to non-law students. This finding may support the incorporation of the comic strips into conventional lectures. Likewise, Spanjaard, Batty and Endeshaw (2023) emphasised the potential visual instructions to facilitate non-law students' understanding of textually dense materials and complex legal principles.

Empirical studies further support the pedagogical benefits of comics in legal education. Abezin (2024) found that incorporating comics into legal instruction increased student engagement and improved doctrinal comprehension compared to traditional lecture-based methods. The study focuses on using cartoon as an interactive teaching method in law school to train law students. Although the study devoted to professional legal

education, the authors noted the universality of the method which could be adapted to non-law students or interdisciplinary courses.

In the same vein, Wenqing and Chenxi (2024) reported that comics enhanced legal literacy by connecting formal legal content with students' personal experiences, making abstract legal ideas more tangible. These findings align with Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986; Vilaça, 2022), which posits that learning improves when visual and verbal information is processed through complementary cognitive channels.

Despite these benefits, several limitations and challenges must be acknowledged. Giddens (2012) and Abezin (2024) warned that adapting complex legal doctrines into comic format may lead to oversimplification, which can result in misconceptions or superficial understanding of critical legal concepts. Additionally, comics are sometimes perceived as informal or lacking academic rigor, which may cause some educators and students to underestimate their value in serious legal education. To address these concerns, comics should be implemented as complementary tools rather than replacements for traditional methods.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a within-subjects, pretest–post-test design to determine the possibility of improving the performance among non-law students in Business Law by using comic strips as a teaching tool. The same cohort of 16 students who had failed the course in Semester 1 using traditional lectures were taught the same content in Semester 2 with the addition of comic strips as a visual-narrative teaching tool.

The sample size is based on the actual number of students who failed the Business Law course previous semester. The use of the same participants across two semesters provided an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the use comic strips as instructional tools. However, this paper intended to show how a small-scale exploratory classroom intervention could improve the students' academic performance instead of generalising the findings to the wider populations of non-law students. The consistent and substantial improvement observed across all participants indicates compelling preliminary evidence which warrant further investigation using larger and more diverse samples.

Participants

Participants were 16 non-law undergraduate students who had previously failed the Business Law course.

Intervention

Students were exposed to visually engaging format using comic strips to discuss legal principles, cases and statutory interpretation in the following semester instead of depending solely on the traditional lecture-based method. The students are required to interpret cases and legal principles from the comic strips which demand active participation from them. In both semesters, the syllabus, assessment methods, rubric and lecturer remained the same.

Data Collection

Students' official grades from Semester 1 and Semester 2 were collected and converted into grade-point values using a standard 4-point scale (e.g., D=1.0, C=2.0, B=2.7). The primary outcome was the change in average grades, with individual student progress also reviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All 16 students showed measurable grade improvement with none receiving a failing grade after the intervention.

Student	Semester 1	Semester 2
Student 1	D+	B-

Student 2	D	C+
Student 3	D+	C
Student 4	D+	C
Student 5	D+	C
Student 6	D+	C
Student 7	D+	C
Student 8	D+	C
Student 9	D+	C
Student 10	E	B-
Student 11	D	C
Student 12	D+	C
Student 13	D+	C
Student 14	D+	C+
Student 15	D	C
Student 16	E	C

Figure 1 (see above) illustrates each student's improvement in grade points, confirming the consistency and extent of performance gains.

The average grade point rose from 1.08 in Semester 1 (D range) to 2.13 in Semester 2 (C range), marking an average increase of 1.05 points. The pass rate improved from 0% to 100%. The Descriptive result table below summarizes the change in average performance:

Metric	Semester 1	Semester 2
Average Grade Point	1.08 (D range)	2.13 (C range)
Pass Rate	0%	100%
Average Grade Improvement	-	+1.05 points

Individual Grade Changes

Each student showed measurable improvement. The results indicate that the whole group benefitted from the use of comic strips in lectures and tutorials. Students who failed the paper with grade E or D managed to improve their results by receiving to at least grade C and some managed to obtain a B-.

DISCUSSION

Following the introduction of comic strips as a teaching tool, the students' results who has failed the course previously show a 100% passing rate. The average results move from D range to a C range grade suggest the incorporation of comic strips as a supplementary method of instruction was associated with the improvement of the students' performance. These findings indicated that combining both visual and narrative instructions may support students' comprehension of complex legal principles more effectively than using the traditional lecture-based method alone. However, the within subject design does not allow the improvement to be attributed solely to the comic strip intervention because other factors such as repeated exposure to the subject, familiarity with the subject and increase motivation may also contributed to the improvement.

By incorporating legal concept into comic and presented in a real-life situation helps to change the students' perception that learning law is not related to them. As such, the use of comic-based scenario in the classroom appeared to encourage the students to participate and provide opportunities for them to engage actively in solving legal problem, which contributed to their better understanding of the subject. This observation, nevertheless,

should be interpreted cautiously since there is no independent measurement on the students' engagement and motivation.

The study of business law involves understanding legal principles and applying those principles, including their exceptions and qualification, to factual situations. As such, it is important to maintain a balance between pedagogical advantage of simplification and doctrinal accuracy. The simplification of complex legal principles in the form of comic strips or short visual narratives may imply that certain legal principles are more mechanical than they do in practice. Students may develop the misconceptions that once facts are proven, certain legal principles will automatically apply.

In reality, the situation is more complex because established facts may be disputed evidence may be lacking or incomplete, legal principles may be subjected to exceptions and qualifications, and judges often interpret and consider various legal principles before reaching their decisions. Thus, comic should never be treated as a complete statement of law but rather as an introduction to the legal principles. This introduction must be followed by conventional teaching methods, including a comprehensive explanation of the law, references to and discussion of relevant statutory provisions and cases as well as problem -solving tutorials.

The incorporation of comic strips as a teaching tool could impose some practical challenges in implementing the method. First, the preparation of meaningful comic strips is time consuming compared to the preparation of traditional lecture slides. The instructors must develop and design scenarios, selecting appropriate visual and dialogue to reflect accurate legal principles. Second, the method may be difficult to implement across multiple topics and large classes without the support from the institutions particularly accessibility to digital tools. Third, there may be some resistance from the lecturers and students to the use of comic strips as teaching and learning tool because of the perception that comic often associated with entertainment instead of academically oriented. As such, it would be more appropriate for comic strips to be used as a supplementary tool instead of as a main tool.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations and should therefore be interpreted cautiously. First, the study involved 16 participants from single institution who had previously failed the Business Law course. The findings therefore should not be generalised to all non-law students and to other institutions. Second, academic grades were used as an indicator of learning improvement and with higher grades reflecting better academic performance. However, the findings do not establish whether other aspects of learning improved, such as students' motivation, engagement, confidence or reduced anxiety when learning law. Third, since the students studied the subject for the second time, their improved grades could not be attributed exclusively to the use of comic strips as learning tools. Other factors such as repeated exposure to the legal content, familiarity with the assessment structures, better knowledge of lecturer's expectation and increased motivation to pass the course may influence the students' results. As such, comic strips as teaching tools could be associated with the students' performance but could not be concluded as the definitive cause of the improvement. Lastly, the invention adopted did not measured the duration of students' knowledge retention. It therefore remains unclear whether the students were able to retain the knowledge of legal principles for a longer period apply those principles effectively to the practical situations.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study are consistent with the Dual Coding Theory (DCT) which propose that visual and verbal learning enhances recall. It reinforces the value of creative pedagogy in higher education and supports the integration of multimodal methods in legal education. It also demonstrates the potential for broader adoption across non-law discipline. The integration of visual and verbal narratives through comic can simplify complex legal concepts and presented them in relatable situations. The approach may enhance the students' understanding and engagement while reducing the intimidation often associated with legal studies, which frequently involve abstract and complex terminologies.

The findings highlight several conclusions for instructors who wish to adopt comic in their teaching of Business Law Course. Firstly, comics should be used as complementary and not to replace traditional legal instructions. Secondly, the integration of comic as part of teaching and learning process must be made with thoughtful design and aligned with learning objectives to be effective. Thirdly, the visual narratives should preserve accurate legal terminology and must include exceptions and qualifications to the legal principles. Therefore, the learning process should include comic-based learning followed by conventional tutorials that provide in- depth discussions and structured problem-solving activities. During these activities, the students should be guided to identify the legal issue, state the relevant law, apply the law and reached a reasoned conclusion. Finally, instructors must make sure that the scenarios, characters and dialogues are culturally appropriate and relatable to the students' populations.

RECOMMENDATION

The future research on this area should replicate the intervention expanding the student sample and institution diversity. This allows for better representation of the findings and provides stronger evidence on the effectiveness of integrating comic into teaching and learning. In addition, a mixed-method approach combining the performance data with research qualitative data such as students' reflection, interviews or survey response. The input from the data would be valuable in terms of understanding whether comic-based instruction influence the students' perceptions on relevance, motivation and engagement in addition to improvement of performance. This could assist the instructors to design suitable instruction in the future that could improve understanding, enjoyment and confidence in learning law. Another possible research on this area that could be explored in future would be on delayed post-test to evaluate long-term knowledge retention and problem-based assessment are able to determine whether the students can apply the legal principles to factual situations. Future research could also incorporate a comparison or control group to differentiate the repeated exposure to the course.

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