

ARTIST: Doesn't dwell on past

From Page A1

it's hard to turn them on to the old stuff that they probably don't have any contact with," Armstrong said.

True enough.

But when Armstrong holds up pictures of Popeye or Betty Boop — characters who haven't seen new celluloid in decades — the kids don't miss a beat before calling out their names. So maybe it's not completely hopeless.

Dribs and drabs

Armstrong, who's been teaching cartooning since 1976, likes to give his students a lot of time to draw and find their own inspiration.

But while he's demonstrating the day's lesson, he drops in dribs and drabs of cartooning history while drawing.

During a session on facial expressions, for example, Armstrong sketched a face with a stretched scream and bulging eyes. While he drew, he talked about Graham Engles, a 1950s artist who penned some of the best frightened faces.

The Comics Code Authority — with a list of regulations longer than Mr. Fantastic's stretchy arm — put an end to the era's horror comics, he explained to the class.

"I'm just in love with American culture and history and sometimes I can't contain my enthusiasm and I want to share it," Armstrong said.

Door-to-door sales

Cartooning classes span six weeks and in that time, Armstrong teaches the basics — proportion, expression, movement — and then oversees as students create an eight-panel page of their own.

"The cartoon class is really a stealthy way for me to teach the nuts and bolts of drawing," he said.

Armstrong collects the pages, collates them and turns them into a class comic book.

"I go to a copy shop and make a book for the kids, kind of a class anthology," he said. "I just want to show them how simple it is just to knock something together."

During a recent Dixon class, he mentions offhandedly that a friend of his (Robert Crumb) used to make comic books with his brother and sell them door to door out of a wagon.

"The kids kind of go, 'Oh hey, that's a cool idea,'" Armstrong said.

Most students fill their first panel with a title, such as "The Chemical," "The Magic Box" and "The Wrong Choice." None of the characters are especially superhero-like, except perhaps Hannah Cunningham's invisible character, depicted by glasses, tie, hat, boots, gloves and the inside of a mouth, visible when the character talks.

Miles Mistler's "The Wrong Choice" starts by introducing a group of friends. The second panel says, "Robert was the only non-weird one. And he was suspicious ..."

Who could resist reading on?
"It really combines writing

skill and composition," Armstrong said of cartooning.

"They get to invent their own scenarios, their own world, their own reality."

Which is better than watching someone else's imagination on television, he said.

"I'm competing with video games, TV shows," Armstrong said. "Anything they can do on their own, just to get them started, build a fire under them and hope that they can continue doing it."

Ogres and ants

Carly Courtney, a Dixon student who is forever asking "Does it have to be human?" has taken Armstrong's class twice.

Even though it's her second go-around, she, as well as classmates, improved markedly over the course of six weeks.

Armstrong's daughter, Claire Armstrong, who wasn't interested in learning the fine points of drawing, fell in love with computer animation after visiting PDI, a Palo Alto computer animation studio that worked on both "Shrek" movies and "Antz." Now she's studying to do similar work.

But, again, Armstrong doesn't ramble on about how he's influencing younger generations. Instead, he talks about how they've helped him.

"I love getting these kids who take my class because they just love to draw," he said. "It's really gratifying. I think that's why I've stayed with the teaching thing."

— Reach Claire St. John at 427-6955 or cstjohn@dailyrepublic.net