

The Practical Implications and Possibilities for Graphic Novels and Comic Books as a Component of the Literacy Experience: A Proposal

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Abstract. Through the multitude of media and other forms of visual, verbal, and physical representation that is the modern school curriculum, teachers must make calculated decisions about curriculum. These decision affect not only the extent or depth of a subject that they teach, but also in the pedagogy through which they do it. The development of a critical literacy skillset lies at the ultimate end of literacy or reading instruction. This critical literacy skillset represents an essential part of the voice that is being developed by each student (Morrell, 2007). Through this voice, students exercise the skillsets required to engage their communities and other social contexts and promote greater understanding and change. Teachers who work to this instructional end make use of a wide range of curricular vehicles and so the choice of these vehicles becomes of paramount importance (Moss, 2007). This researcher will make the argument, as have many before, that comic books and graphic novels represent a largely untapped resource for the degree of influence they have. This influence comes not only in the engaging nature of the medium, but also in the ability to use important elements of art and story in a symbiotic fashion. In this way, each draws the best from the other.

Keywords: Graphic novels, comic books, pedagogy, multimodal, literacy, narratives.

1. Introduction

The textual medium that communicates information for learning has evolved radically over the course of the past century, though mostly only on the surface. Any who have studied a textbook will attest to the conclusion that they have gone largely unchanged for several decades. We have gone from printed pages heavy with text and short on illustration or detail to the modern social media platforms. Though the fields of entertainment and education often diverge from

one another, there are certainly areas of significant and growing overlap. In the modern classroom, the resurgence of the comic book and graphic novel has significantly bolstered the presence of another modality of literacy and learning. Both comic books and graphic novels wield both great promise and process as they each relate to student learning (Clark, 2013). The modern reading resource offers students information that can be both informative and highly visual at the same time. These mediums possess a wealth of information and present the information in ways that help to create a multi-faceted sense of modern literacy (Boerman-Cornell, 2013; Chute, 2008; Connors, 2015; Dittmer, 2010; Hoff, 1982; Labio, 2011).

Unfortunately and historically, these mediums have been looked down on more than embraced or looked to as a resource for learning. While comic books originally had great potential as a medium for the kind of narration and perspective they represented, the independent and decentralized nature of the comic book industry at the time meant that there was no real established set of norms for the graphic nature of the content (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz, 2015). This meant that the decentralized nature of the industry partly worked against itself in terms of cultivating readership. Initially, teachers were receptive to the presence and use of comics in their classrooms; even supplying them by themselves (Jones, 2017). However, the independent nature of the comic industry gave way to suspicion at the community, then state, then federal level. Individuals from a range of backgrounds were suddenly both interested and concerned with the presence and possible influence upon the young of this new medium. From this, emerged the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers (ACMP) with a code of standards that were specifically focused on the impact that this kind of story and illustration might have on young reading minds (Duncan, Smith, & Levitz, 2015; Gordon, 2000; Hirsch, 2014; Lopes, 2006).

The graphic narrative medium represents a vast resource for learning. We are surrounded by it every day, but these mediums have yet to gain widespread acceptance and implementation across schools. This article will argue that this represents misguided thinking and/or an absence of greater understanding for what comic books and graphic novels actually are and what they are capable of delivering.

2. Pedagogical and Content Connections

Teachers have a curriculum with extensive resources and embedded support and so make use of these systems of instruction and assessment, but that does not address how engaging they are. Teachers are the ones that know this for their students. Some teachers may have their own unique system of organization for content and pedagogy; one that is driven by a specific set of instructional priorities or goals. In the first case, this is to say that the curriculum may come as a packaged unit, so the use of outside resources may be minimally necessary or even desirable. The content may be developed just that well or simply aligned to a particular set of assessment. Whatever the reason, the prescriptive outcome is the same. Though some educators view this as being too stringent an approach and so will work to gather information and resources from at least a

few extra places. Either way, the use of a text plays the role of being a central vehicle to deliver this information.

In the second case and for teachers that utilize the varied sources instructional approach, they have the ability to assemble a portfolio of resources to present to students alongside anything that may come as a pre-packaged curriculum. The nature of developing these resources and constantly keeping them updated is a consuming task, both professionally and personally. The ever-intensive nature of this environmental tempo, this is not an option that all teachers choose. Again, and in line with whatever set of goals or priorities that the teacher operates by, the use of a text plays the role of being a central vehicle to deliver this information.

The second case above aligns with what William Pinar (1994) refers to as the 'synoptic text' framework. That is to say that the broad array of materials the teacher brings to their teaching comprise a larger narrative or set of asserted truths. It is up to the teacher as to how broadly or deeply this instructional spectrum is built and executed. The varied modalities and literacies they represent could be likened to a specific set of tools on the part of the teacher. Regardless of the subject or nature of individual instructional responsibilities, pedagogy is the province of the educator. This is because all teaching requires some style or manner of execution and it is through the teacher's pedagogy that the essential mission of the school is carried out (Freire, 1970). The student should come away from this experience with the ability to process new information and to understand how to enact or act on that same information without having the disadvantage of being indoctrinated through the study of topics which are inherently dulling of the senses.

Regardless of the discipline or grade level, there is always some degree of showmanship or pageantry that comes to bear in the presentation of new information. Without this unique flair, the curiosity that leaves students hungry to learn and experience more, and that teachers are counting on so that learning is not an overly combative experience, may be found wanting. Ultimately, the pedagogy of the teacher is a main driver for what keeps the students actively engaged in the material (Gorlewski & Schmidt, 2011). In doing this, teachers must tap into a realm of creativity that few other professions are as adept at. From a collectivist meta-cognitive perspective, the teacher must deftly arrange, re-arrange, and execute all manner of instructional pageantry across a group of very unique individuals with unique learning needs. It is within this realm of developing critical literacy and information processing that a greater and richer sense of story emerges through the presence of comic book or graphic novels (Jacobs, 2007).

3. History of Comic Books and Graphic Novels

As a recognizable medium, comic books originate from the early 1900's. As a medium, they have a convoluted path of development, but the art form nonetheless found widespread appeal across readers. Historically, graphic novels and comic books have not enjoyed the highest acclaim across various

circles of the literary or educational community. Numerous individuals across a range of academic disciplines immediately saw a watered-down form of literature, instead of a richly illustrated multimodal reading experience. It was because of this bias, that comics were initially accepted, but ultimately rejected (Dias, 1946; Makey, 1952; Pustz, 2012). There is an independent nature to the comic book and graphic novel medium that did not easily fit within the strictures required by schools in how they would be used to teach students. While not all comic book publishers distributed objectionable materials, which usually meant nudity and some sexual content. This was enough for citizen's groups to complain about in objecting to their widespread presence across the nation's youth. This created a momentum of belief that converged with the censor-driven politics of the post-World War II era regarding decent and readable topics. As a result, a means of comic and graphic censorship and approval was created as a reactionary means. This board was seen largely as a tool of censorship (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2015). For this and other related reasons, many educators and schools abandoned the notion of developing comic books into focused teaching tools. For the independent artist, preservation of the independence associated with the art form was of central importance.

For this and other reasons, an important developmental opportunity was not lost, but greatly set back. While there are a variety of other reasons that constitute the historical and contemporary explanation for these perspectives, it is important to understand what an essential place both graphic narrative forms have within and across contemporary literary genres and reader interest and consumption. It is a practical matter to state that, for the sheer possibilities inherent to these mediums themselves, both should be looked at in-depth as a means to introduce content, or support it in the studies that students take and as a means across the school. Comic Books and Graphic Novels represent the same legitimate forms of graphic information resources available in other instructional practices. As a text, there is a deep well of possibility that becomes apparent through the use of this extensive graphic narrative pedagogy. Comic books and graphic novels fully represent what Pinar (1994) presents as a textualized set of cultural meanings and assumptions. Pinar generally frames the concept of a 'text' as a vessel or set of ordered iconic or other meanings that delivers a symbolically ordered set of understandings. Human beings derive value from our collective and individual interpretations of these sets of ordered meanings. This explains the predictable outcomes from normal and banal social transactions. This is why certain kinds of movies or other kinds of entertainment make us sad or joyful, we know what to expect from McDonalds, and so on and so forth.

4. Use of the Text in Schools

In referring to this as a text, it must be established that we are not talking strictly about a textbook or other forms of literary or graphic content that are traditional across the schools. We must broaden what is understood to compose a text in the first place. While textbooks have comprised the bulwark for how schools have presented information to students, a text must be understood in terms of the dynamic nature of it's contents. Thus, a movie may be considered a text, or a

series of short stories, or a spoken word presentation, or a piece of cultural music. Operating with this broader definition allows the teacher to incorporate all manner of interesting and varied means into their instruction. Thus, the focus of instructional content can be derived from music, food, dance, art, and graphic narrative materials. In the case of graphic narratives, namely comic books and graphic novels, both present information in ways that is visually stunning. Paraphrasing Sir Ken Robinson from a past TED talk, “modern children live in one of the most sensory stimulating periods of human history”. With an ability to access vast amounts of information through a touch screen, there are limitless possibilities out there. As a set of ordered meanings, comic books and graphic novels present information in the ways that is visually engaging and meets every level of quality that a traditional textbook could hope to do.

We all, especially students, reside in a world that is highly visual in nature. People process information daily through the interplay of different kinds of social cues and human behaviors. The ability to understand this enables a person to become proficient in studying the smaller and more subtle details of different situations or other human interactions (Gorlewski and Schmidt, 2011). This requires something of a different skillset for modern students, a different and stronger form of literacy. While various forms of text and prose have always been and always will be utilized across education, these longer narratives no longer constitute the sole bulwark through which students navigate to understand what they are learning. Learning is a highly sense-driven process (Frey and Fisher, 2004; Pagliaro, 2014; Stoermer, 2009). There are elements that are auditory in nature, but which certainly benefit from a visual dimension. What reader doesn't enjoy a good story that is also visually engaging on some level and within a certain genre? The teacher who can make theoretical concepts of science tangible for students to reach out and touch has staying power far above the individual who hovers around the chalkboard for note-taking exercises.

Both comic books and graphic novels represent a process of reading and refined development of meaning making that surpasses traditional narrative structure. Chief among these is the ability to understand a greater and more expansive context and situation because of added imagery (Richardson, 2017; Schwarz, 2006; Versaci, 2001). As persuasive as any author may be, they are limited by an inability to describe every single nuance of a character, situation, or social transaction. The depiction of these added elements brings with it a sense of contextual depth that otherwise would not be. Teachers who look for ways to engage students in critical literacy development have a formidable resource in front of them when they can further develop student voices in analysis and critical writing (Savage, 2008). While these mediums are hardly new to most readers, their use in education is not representative of the instructional potential they have for learning, hence, representative of untapped potential.

5. Rationale for a place in the classrooms

With multiple layers that comprise functions at every level of schooling, from the choice of books to the development of educational outcomes, this is hardly a

straightforward matter for the modern teacher. Schools in the modern educational landscape present a unique professional and pedagogical challenge for teachers. From the perspective of the teacher, their job is more tightly tied to assessment and student academic progress than ever before. Over the past 10-15 years, there has been a palpable shift in how teachers are both evaluated with regard to their professional practices and in how viewed as part of the fundamental relationship to the institution of schooling. Numerous forces that are both political and social in nature are utilizing the lens of academic achievement as the one and only primary means of determining the value of the individual teacher's instructional contribution and this kind of metric is being formally included in evaluation metrics across the profession of education.

Adding to this is finding the pedagogical balance between how the teacher would best teach a particular subject versus the time constraints and overall scheduling requirements that have an inhibiting effect on the very instruction. While it was once somewhat a bad joke to say one might find all the teachers in a given grade on the same page at the same time and on the date, that is the end that a phrenetic educational environment ultimately leads to. Teachers are the first to know what excites their students, yet their own professional judgment is mostly left out of the public discussion or policy-making groups. They are the sole custodians for what makes instruction in any school interesting, yet their contribution does not come on the front end. Whether the class comes alive through their teaching or if they are simply a good facilitator for the kinds of student learning that often happens behind the scenes, teachers maintain the essence of learning through the way they exercise and execute their pedagogy. Pedagogy, to the teacher, is the ultimate canvas upon which to depict what they teach. Pedagogy is as important to a teacher as skill and passion and technical ability are to an artist.

The unique curricular space that can be filled or focused through the presence of comic books and graphic novels is present across any curriculum. Teachers have the ability to pull resources in that are visually exciting and captivating. In the instance of electronic or online comics, there is the added dimension of drama that may come from the soundtrack(s). In the final analysis, teachers may have extensive kinds of curriculum from which to choose, but if they want students engaged, then there are certain types that they consistently choose.

In choosing mediums like the kind described in this article, teachers are opening a panoply of instructional options. Whether someone teaches all subjects with a smaller class or is responsible for a smaller number with a larger group, they maintain a focused approach to the introduction and coverage of new content. When the teacher plans well, this is supported through assessment and ongoing instructional or other revisions that subsequently help to refine the teacher's pedagogy. Utilizing a graphic narrative medium such as comic books and graphic novels for both instruction and student research and extension represents a significantly improved and broadened. With this highly enriched visual medium, the teacher may devote the greatest part of their efforts to the facilitation of student work or of group discussion, also essential in the learning

process. This enables them to target other areas of student learning for refinement while the students are utilizing this resource.

6. Conclusion: Practical Implications for the Classroom and Instruction

As shown through this discussion, these graphic mediums present a plethora of possibilities for classroom teachers. Teachers should take it upon themselves to go out and seek these mediums and narratives for their students. The sheer degree of variation along the lines of reading modality is enough to be excited about the prospects by itself. Teachers should look to historians and graphic artists in collecting these kinds of materials for their students and their classrooms. When they begin to collect these kinds of resources and utilize them, the graphic arts industry will respond. This response would mean even more variation in the kinds of content and perspective that students could learn in schools.

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