Rethinking Graphic Novels in the Classroom: 
Broadening Our Concepts of Literature to Benefit Readers

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When I started Teacher’s College, I began hearing about graphic novels. Of course I know what comic books are, I grew up reading Garfield books and the like. My first interest in newspapers was not in the headlines, opinions, or editorials. Like most other kids, it was the comic strips. But still, Teacher’s College began to shed a whole new light on what I was now to call graphic text.

Generally speaking, graphic media has long been denied as a legitimate form of literature. This applies to all levels, from graphic stories geared toward young children to adults pursuing it at a career level. It was not until the 1990s that colleges and universities began to offer programs in "sequential art" (Sturm, 2002). Even now, you might be hard-pressed to find an audience who agrees that the works of Art Spiegelman are as significant as those of Mark Twain. This of course depends on whether or not Spiegelman’s name is recognized and appreciated alongside Twain’s.

There are some misconceptions that arise from the use of the term "graphic novels," a common one being that it conjures an image of an actual full length novel. Fletcher-Spear, Jensen-Benjamin, and Copeland (2005) maintain that the term is just used to generalize the pairing of sequential art with written words. They are similar to novels in that they come in all kinds of genres and areas of interest, but the differences are critical to note. Because graphic novels involve a synthesis between the words and art, they must be read and interpreted in an entirely different way.

Regardless of the history and confusion surrounding them, graphic novels are gaining ground in the world of literacy. There are many new opinions arising about the benefits graphic novels have to offer readers. In her research, Kan (2006) found many people who believe that graphic novels address the needs of multiple learning styles, and that the visualizations help readers to understand the story first and the text after. Some feel that graphic novels require more skills to read than regular novels. Bylsma (2007) writes that in order to understand graphic novels, readers must be "actively engaged in the process of decoding and comprehending a range of literary devices, including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, and the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality, and inference" (unpaged).

Graphic novels still provide challenges. Schwarz (2006) notes that teacher-librarians must choose carefully when adding graphic novels to their library. Similar to other forms of literature, not all graphic texts are appropriate for all age groups. Some graphic novels are not at all appropriate for school settings due to mature language or depictions of sexuality. Even the seemingly valuable graphic novels must be screened for appropriate content (Schwarz, 2006).

Perhaps the biggest challenge to successfully integrating graphic novels into the classroom has nothing to do with the actual novels themselves. Teachers have to rethink their literacy programs. They have to readdress their personal concept of literature and become learned themselves in different kinds of literacy (Schwarz, 2006). If teachers put in this kind of effort, they should be able to successfully integrate graphic novels into multiple aspects of their programming.
How My Beliefs about Graphic Novels Changed

Admittedly, I was resistant to the idea of graphic texts in the classroom at first. My suspicion of their quality and merit was confirmed during my first practicum in a grade four class. I was asked to read with a boy who lagged behind his classmates. His book of choice was from a popular series of graphic novels which, to my horror, I quickly discovered contained numerous purposely misspelled words. "How is this boy going to learn how to read and write properly when this is his model?" I thought to myself.

As time went on my weariness of graphic novels continued. I kept hearing about how they were being used more and more often in the classroom, not just for free reading, but for actual lessons. I was vaguely aware that I too would be required to bring graphic text into the classroom during my second practicum, and I dreaded the assignment. I didn’t know what to do, how to use graphic texts, and I could not foresee what the students could possibly gain from the experience.

Eventually I was in the full swing of my second practicum in a wonderful grade one class. My anxiety about the graphic text assignment grew as the practicum went on. I kept thinking to myself about how difficult it would be to introduce graphic text to the class. I thought about the fact that the students were just learning to read as it was, and wondered how they would handle the unique and unconventional format of a graphic story. Little did I know at the time that this very facet would be the key to their success, as well as my own.

I was presented with a *What's For Lunch?* (Booth, 2007) magazine from the *Boldprint* series shortly before beginning my work with the grade one class. The entire magazine was conveniently geared toward grade one students. Even more miraculous was the fact that in this magazine, there was a graphic story called "The Turnip." It is a charming Ukrainian folktale about an old farming couple that grow a very large turnip in their garden. Try as they might, the two cannot pull the turnip out of the ground on their own. They keep adding members from around the farm to help them - first the dog, then the cat, a pig, an ant, and a couple other helpers. Eventually, with lots of teamwork the turnip comes flying out of the ground. However, all of the helpers get stuck piled up on one another.

I introduced the story, and graphic texts to the class with a discussion, some charting of similarities and differences to other books, and of course reading the story out loud. The story was met with much enthusiasm from some of the children, particularly those who often chose graphic novels from the library for their personal reading. I was pleased to see that all the students just accepted it as another story. I read to them quite a bit, so there was no shock that I was in front of them reading, and there was no evidence of confusion about the type of literature I had chosen for that day.

After reading the story for the first time, we discussed what we would call this type of story. Several children were able to identify it as a comic, upon which I introduced the term “graphic story” as a synonym for comic. We discussed how we could tell the difference between a graphic story and a picture book. The things the children noticed were the "squares," or panels, speech and thought bubbles, and the small amount of narratives at the top of most panels.

Next, after discussing how to recognize graphic texts, I told the children that I was going to read the story again, and instructed them to pay very close attention to the story, as they would need to recreate it later. As I reread this time, I emphasized with my voice the main parts of the story, and took more time to allow them to look at the pictures. While I was reading, I pointed to whatever panel I was currently on so they could follow along with how I was reading the story.

Afterward, the children went to their desks to complete the follow up activity. This activity dealt with sequencing. I had photocopied six panels relating to the main parts of the story (what I had identified as falling at the beginning, middle and end of the story) for each child. They were
then instructed to decide the order of the story, and to paste them in order onto newsprint paper. The children had recently done work with sequencing of stories and were familiar with the concepts, although we did do a brief review before they started their independent work.

The next day we completed the second portion of the assignment. We reviewed the story, which ends with the open-ended question, "So... what do we do now?" The class brainstormed things that could have happened next in the story. After the brainstorming session, the students were given a worksheet that I had made with three empty comic panels (two small ones along the top, and one big one on the bottom) and instructed to finish the comic in response to the open-ended question that came at the end of the story. I emphasized that they had to plan carefully so that their ending fit into three panels. They were also reminded about other characteristics of graphic stories, like small amounts of narrative in each panel, and using speech and thought bubbles; all things which we had discussed the previous day and had pointed out in the story.

As a whole the children seemed to enjoy the tasks, especially that of creating their own endings. However, I still wanted to find out what, if any, effect graphic stories had on the reluctant readers in my class. My inclination was that since they did not have to rely on words to understand the story, these students might be more motivated to complete the assignments. I thought that if the student was secure in his/her knowledge of the story’s plot and characters, he/she would feel more comfortable and confident. However, I was aware that obstacles could still arise. If sufficient interest in the subject or reading in general was not generated, then I did not think it would matter what kind of story I put in front of the children.

There were two children in particular that I was interested in observing during the activities. I had the two, Sarah and Pierre (names are pseudonyms), sit with me at their desks so I could observe their thoughts and processes. I was interested in these children since both are prone to distraction and often require a great deal of extra support, especially with their reading and writing. Early on I had to do a great deal of reorienting and prompting with Sarah. I tried very hard not to give her the answers, but just to refocus her on the task at hand. Several times I stopped and talked to her about things the class had already learned regarding sequencing, as well as things we had just learned about the components of graphic stories. Slowly but surely she made progress, although I am not sure how engaged she was in the tasks, particularly the first activity regarding sequencing. A very artistic and creative girl, she had much more success with the completion of her own story ending. Though it did not contain much written text or the telltale signs of graphic stories, like speech and thought bubbles, her images flowed accurately. Her interpretation of the ending was relevant to the actual story, and was very creative as well.

Pierre had a great deal of success with both tasks. He required absolutely no prompting or reorientation throughout either task. I believe this to be due to a combination of my constant presence and his interest in the literary medium of graphic stories. He was very engaged in the tasks and very proud of himself for knowing what to do. It seemed as though he really enjoyed both tasks and the fact that he knew what to do, which motivated him to get working and stay working until he was finished. He illustrated great pictures and added some great speech. His story was engaging, creative, and relevant to the original story. He included some of the original characters and introduced a new one, the “turnip monster.” He did not include any narrative boxes, but he did include both speech and thought bubbles.

As a teacher, I have a philosophy that we should reward and celebrate successes, no matter how small. I would say that both Sarah and Pierre had various levels of success with the graphic stories and their subsequent activities. I had to do a great deal of scaffolding for Sarah, drawing on her previous knowledge about the beginning, middle and end, and having her examine the pictures for clues. She did show evidence of understandings. She understood that we were telling
a story. She understood that the pictures could communicate parts of the story, and she built upon that quite successfully. I would be quite interested to see what would happen if she was to do this type of assignment again without my supervision. Unlike Pierre, I don’t think she had quite the same level of interest in this particular story or medium.

As a whole, the class enjoyed the assignments, a fact I attribute to the sheer novelty of the situation. They were not used to doing work with graphic stories. They do have access to a small number of graphic stories in the library for independent reading, such as Batman and Spiderman books. Many of them, especially the boys do take advantage of this, but this was the first time they got to do actual work with this medium in the classroom. I am not sure whether or not they consider graphic stories to be valuable sources of literature, so the situation was new and fun to most.

A couple of students, including Sarah, did seem to find it rather difficult, uninteresting, or both. There are a number of reasons for this. Perhaps the lessons were not geared to their particular learning styles, something I as the teacher should have remedied. Another possibility is that at their young age, with their limited experience with reading, they simply did not have enough background knowledge to be able to complete this activity with ease. One other major possibility is that they simply are not interested in graphic stories or reading in general quite yet.

While this activity was fun, and it did teach the children a great deal about writing for an audience, sequencing, and storytelling, it also highlighted my belief that children need to be able to access a wide variety of literature. It does not matter if they are a boy or girl, fluent reader or struggling, an English Language Learner (ELL) or English speaking, each child has unique interests. Without access to all types of literature, you are bound to have some kids lose interest in reading very early in their school careers.

I am no longer as vehemently opposed to graphic stories as I was at the beginning of Teacher’s College. I now understand that they can be a very effective teaching strategy. The main reason why I believe graphic texts are good for reluctant readers is that they do not rely strictly on words to tell the story. The images play such a huge role in telling the story that almost anyone can follow along, something I cannot deny as being a benefit to those struggling with reading. It is a good place to start with your reluctant readers because they are not overwhelmed by printed word. They can begin to read little by little, and feel successful that they understand the story. This can quite potentially give them the self-confidence and motivation to continue learning to read.

Overall, I truly do find graphic texts very fun and useful. I firmly believe that students must be exposed to all different kinds of literature for optimal learning. I also still believe that there is some literature which will always be valued more highly than other types by some people. However, none of this changes the fact that I personally believe in and advocate for creating a well rounded, diversified collection of literature, including graphic novels, available to all students. Graphic novels are an entertaining and creative way to not only get kids reading, but writing with a purpose as well.

Children, like adults, have very different interests. In order to optimize learning, we have to make sure that each child has access to some of the things that interest each of them the most. This certainly includes their literary preferences. That being said, it is a fact that in the classroom there will not always be a choice. Students need to be taught how to adapt to the changes in the classroom. However, I strongly believe that there need to be some built-in options for choice in our programs where it is possible. If children are not able to pursue their own interests, then they will cease to see the importance of learning, and in this particular case, literacy. Reading will become a chore rather than a pleasurable activity. We owe it to our students to let them explore
literacy in their own way so that they each become life-long readers, which I believe is one of the greatest gifts you can ever give to someone.

References

Recommended Graphic Novels for Primary/Junior Students

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