
Implementing Graphic Texts into the Language Arts Classroom

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Introduction

Historically, comic books have been reviled as worthless popular literature adolescents ingest like junk food. Through the years, however, the artistry involved in creating comic books has evolved to a point where long, complex narratives with mature themes have become commonplace, and the term “graphic novel” has been coined to identify this new, sophisticated class of graphic texts. Not just pulpy entertainment anymore, comic books and graphic novels have begun to garner such prestigious awards as the Hugo (*The Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons), the Printz (*American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang), and even the Pulitzer Prize (*Maus* by Art Spiegelman).

There has never been a debate about whether or not comic books have been popular with young readers, but their value as instructional materials has been consistently questioned in the past. Surely with the increase of so-called literary quality in these texts, there must be some room for them within the traditional classroom. Given their popularity and appeal with adolescents, they should be able to engage student readers where tradi-

tional texts may not, and, with new studies on the importance of multiple literacies, the interplay of textual and visual narrative found within comic books and graphic novels could be quite useful in preparing students to navigate within our multimedia landscape.

But how should they be taught? How can teachers get the most out of this unique genre, and how must they prepare themselves to effectively deliver worthwhile lessons? These are the questions I explored through a qualitative process of interviewing teachers who have taught graphic texts in their classrooms in order to collect their experiences and feedback to help equip other teachers with the essential tools to make the most of their instruction.

While graphic novels and comic books share much in common with traditional literary texts, there are many unique aspects of the genre which Language Arts teachers may not be familiar with. Though these texts normally have a typical plot structure and storyline filled with similar characters, themes and metaphors, much of the action and symbolism occurs through use of graphic images rather than words, the English teacher's bread and butter. Though many English teachers may be well-versed in the language of images, there are surely many who are not.

Because so much of a graphic text's story is told through images, teachers introducing graphic novels and comic books into their classes will require some techniques and strategies to analyze this aspect of the storytelling or risk losing out on a large chunk of the text's unique meaning. Since comic books and graphic novels played a large role in fueling my personal love of reading as an adolescent and subsequent interest in becoming an English teacher, I wanted to take a closer at how graphic texts are being used in the classroom and to what effect.

Background

Graphic texts such as comic books and graphic novels have long been popular among adolescent readers, but in recent years the subject matter of these texts has become increasingly

sophisticated and mature. Beyond the traditional superhero tales most often associated with comic books and graphic novels, a growing market exists for realistic fiction, science fiction and fantasy, historical adventure, political satire, biography and memoir within the encompassing graphic novel genre (Bucher, 2004). The popularity of graphic novels has grown beyond the stereotyped subculture of overgrown fanboys and nerds to capture sales of over \$150 million annually (Raiteri, 2003), while winning critical acclaim and inspiring movies to be made about them.

Many teachers have brought comic books and graphic novels into their classrooms in attempts to engage their students with a popular medium, many of them read outside of class. Others try to weave the understanding of visual images and symbols into their discussions on literary devices. With the potential for increased student engagement, and the current call by many researchers for more focus on arming students with the tools to successfully navigate a textual landscape increasingly dominated by information presented in a wide variety of mediums, often simultaneously (Eisner, 2004; Health, 2000; Kist, 2002; Lin, 2005; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Schwartz, 2002; Walsh, 2006), it seems that graphic texts would be a standard inclusion into middle school and high school curricula. However, only isolated projects and experiences have been documented in the literature. If researchers agree that there should be more inclusion of visual texts within the communication and literary arts curriculum, how should they fit into the everyday classroom?

Before answering that question, I wanted to look deeper into the prevailing reasons why graphic texts are considered valuable in the English classroom, namely their ability to engage students, and their use in exploring issues of multimodal literacy, or the “reading” of different media or symbol systems simultaneously.

Engagement and Fluency

When teachers bring popular texts, such as comic books and graphic novels, into the classroom, they do so in hopes that

they can reach the students that are intimidated or frustrated by the big “L” literature they are often asked to read and analyze (Versaci, 2001). Though many of these so called “struggling” readers have become resistant to traditional texts, they often show a surprising level of engagement and fluency when reading popular texts such as comic books or magazines (Moje, et al., 2000). With graphic novels and comic books, students are still able to study “standard literary devices such as point of view, narrative, characterization, conflict, setting, tone, and theme” (Versaci, 2001), and at the very least are offered “diverse alternatives to traditional texts” (Schwartz, 2002). Versaci (2001) also found that, since students came into his freshman composition class with a strong understanding of comic books from years of casual experience with them, they were more comfortable in analyzing them and did so with greater depth than with traditional texts. Furthermore, once they developed a fluency in analyzing comic books, they were often better able to translate those ideas to the traditional texts they’d previously found more difficult. Other researchers have found that the graphic representations help second-language learners decode unfamiliar texts through visual cues (Crawford, 2004).

In her study of children’s understanding of power and gender roles in a California elementary school, Anne Haas Dyson (1994) observed that even students as young as seven and eight years old could express their understanding of those complex themes within the traditional superhero stories found in comic books and cartoons. They were so engaged and familiar with the stories about their favorite superheroes that they were able to express a surprising depth about topics not normally addressed at such an age. Dyson explains that this is due to children understanding the social world of the texts as well as their own social worlds, and their ability to contrast them.

It’s clear that engagement simply enhances fluency. Even when using graphic texts as an alternative to writing, as opposed to just reading, researchers have found a connection between the engagement of graphic texts and the fluency of their students. As part of the “Comic Book Project,” Michael Bitz (2004) gath-

ered volunteer teachers and students in an after school program where students created their own comic books as a means of self-expression. Again, a surprising depth of themes surfaced:

One surprising outcome of The Comic Book Project arose in the themes about which the children wrote. While professional comic books have traditionally been focused on superheroes, science fiction, and fantasized stories, many of the children's comic books were based on the hard reality of living in an inner-city environment. The children's work represents their lives as urban youth. They wrote about themes of drug abuse, gang violence, and harsh family situations, and in some cases the stories had very sad, yet very real, conclusions.

When Bitz administered surveys after the project to the students and the teachers, 92% of teachers and 92% of the students agreed that as a result of the Comic Book Project, the students enjoyed writing their own stories, while 86% of the students and 90% of the teachers felt that students became better at writing as a result.

Furthermore, Bitz observed a high amount of ownership displayed by the students, resulting in some of them not wanting to even turn their projects in out of fear they wouldn't get them back. This level of ownership propelled students to edit their own work heavily, revising not only storylines and characters, but grammar and mechanics as well.

This is an example of moving students from "perfunctory 'for-the-teacher writing' to committed writing", which should be a goal for every teacher (Gillespie, 2005). And if graphic texts can get students to commit that deeply to their writing, that alone makes them strong teaching tools in the English classroom.

Multimodality

More than just being an engaging form of literature for students to study as an alternative to traditional texts, graphic texts may require more "complex cognitive skills than reading text alone" (Lavin, 1998). They are very well-suited to teach the so-called "New Literacy" needed in a world of steadily increasing

visual representations, hypertextuality, and multimedia productions. Maureen Walsh (2006) has gone so far as to say, “the ‘screen’ and multimodal texts have developed new literacies. Written text is only one part of the message, and no longer the dominant part.”

It will therefore be the job of teachers to prepare students to navigate more fluently through multimodal texts as well as traditional texts. Kist (2004) found that, after exposing students to an abstract, arts-rich, “new literacy” curriculum with the inclusion of a wider variety of symbol systems beyond traditional print text, teachers found that “students’ abilities to be good consumers of information [had] risen” when compared to previous coursework with a heavier focus on verbal fluency.

In the words of Eliot Eisner (1994), “if we focus on one main symbol system--print--are we limiting human thought?” Scientists are beginning to understand “how important engaging with the visual arts can be for broadening neural circuitry involvement in the brain” (Heath, 2002). Visual textuality is not just a different symbol system; it’s a different biological process. So in preparing our students to navigate the multimodal world, “we have to move away from the usual linear print-only expectations of ‘reading’”.

Few textbooks or materials selected for use in school reflect these changes; few of us understand how to interpret the neuroscience findings noted above or the realities of electronic media in our own teaching of reading and writing. Only a few glimmers of help have yet appeared. These come in the form of radically different textbooks and innovative programs that stress learning in the arts.

Whether graphic novels or comic books are used as reading texts or as expressive texts, they fulfill this requirement of demanding two forms of literacy from the students, textual and visual, that intertwine together to form a unified meaning. This is no different from what we see everyday in websites and in advertising. As opposed to those two media, however, graphic novels lend themselves to longer and deeper examinations of themes, language and cultural constructs as a novel would, but with the added benefit of requiring a study of visual symbology

and expression.

Students labeled as “struggling readers” who have strong visual talents may even find that they enjoy reading and language arts classes more when they find something they are drawn to and are good at (Eisner, 2004; Kist, 2002). By simply adding another angle to the shape of ‘reading’ and textuality, many students may be able to find a new academic formula to decode a geometry they’ve had trouble calculating previously.

In the Classroom

Despite the strong research supporting graphic texts in the classroom, there may still exist a distrust or condescension towards the medium by teachers shaped by the traditional “canon” of accepted classics, even though graphic novels have become a very strong literary movement worldwide (O’ English, Matthews, & Lindsay, 2006). The tide, though, does seem to be turning. Teachers and researchers such as Bitz, Dyson, Kist, Schwartz and Versaci have discussed and presented their findings and case studies to the education community at large, and are reporting positive results. But little exists right now to pull together their conclusions into a consistent pattern of best practices.

It is one thing for Bitz to run an after school program funded by Teacher’s College and supported by professional comic book artists from Dark Horse Comics, Versaci to include comic books in a collegiate composition course, or Kist to observe college-prep, high school students in a team taught course specifically developed for the inclusion of the arts. It is quite another, however, for the average teacher to try out new material that requires a different lexicon and different preparation than the district-prescribed curriculum of a typical high school or middle school English class.

With this in mind, I investigated how various teachers in typical settings utilized graphic texts within their classrooms and the advice they would give to other teachers attempting to bring these texts into the classroom, focusing on the following three questions:

- What techniques are English teachers using to teach graphic texts?
- What type of training or preparation would be beneficial for other English teachers bringing graphic texts into the classroom?
- What is the value of teaching graphic texts in the English classroom?

Investigation

Setting

The participating teachers actively taught in a variety of middle schools, high schools and a university located in a large, midwestern metropolitan area. The urban center is noted as having large populations of Hispanic, African-American, Somali, Hmong, and Native American students. Minority groups represent roughly 25% of the 1.8 million residents in the two largest metropolitan counties.

“Amanda” taught 10th grade English classes in a suburb of the urban center where 20-25% of students are identified as minorities, with a high representation of students of African and Asian descent. The majority of students were considered to be of middle- or lower-middle class economic background. Two of Amanda’s classes were considered advanced placement, and three regular placement.

“Beth” taught at a charter school in a small community in the second ring of suburbs, which housed grades kindergarten through 12th. The vast majority of students were from a white, middle-class, politically conservative background. Parents here were very active in school life and were part of the curriculum approval process. Seventy-five percent of students from this school went on to higher education after high school. Beth normally taught 11th and 12th grade English, but had not used graphic texts in those courses. Beth did, however, use graphic texts with 9th and 10th graders during a two day, theme -based symposium where students worked on their topics during full day courses.

“Christa” and “Denise” both taught 10th grade English at a high school in a wealthy suburb with 20% students of color. Ninety-five percent of the high school’s graduates go on to higher education and the school was noted as being academically competitive with the vast majority of students taking advanced placement exams. Parents are noted as being highly engaged in their children’s education at the school.

“Eric” taught English at a suburban, public arts high school of competitive enrollment open to 11th and 12th grade students from throughout the state with on-campus residences for out-state students. Sixteen percent of students were considered minorities and 8% qualified for free or reduced lunches.

“Frances” taught a course specifically about graphic novels at a small public university in the urban center. Students were upper-division, creative writing majors of a wide range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of students at the university were enrolled part-time with thirty-six percent identifying themselves as students of color, and 70% being older than 25.

Participants

The participants in this study were all active middle, high school and university teachers who have used comic books or graphic novels as texts within their curricula. All teachers were Caucasian, of middle class economic background, and all taught specifically in Language Arts classrooms. Five of the six teachers interviewed were female and all represented a wide variety of ages and experience levels. I used snowball sampling technique to locate teachers who have taught using graphic texts in their classrooms. I also relied on concept sampling as well because teachers who have taught using graphic texts were the particular target group to be studied.

Data Collection

I gathered information from teachers using a semi-structured interview with eleven scripted questions (see Appendix B),

adding improvised questions to get more detail as necessary. My main focus was to use the interviews to find out what techniques teachers are using to teach graphic texts, what type of training or preparation they thought would be beneficial for other teachers bringing graphic texts into the classroom, and what value they believed graphic texts had within the context of Language Arts education. I then coded the transcripts and field notes for recurring themes related to “best practices” of teaching graphic texts and advice the teachers have for others attempting to use graphic texts within their curriculum

Discoveries

The Teachers

Of relevance to the amount of information gathered in this study, teachers who have formally taught graphic texts were extremely hard to come by. I spoke with many teachers who were interested in using graphic texts in their classrooms, but few had ever actually taught them. Many teachers stated that graphic texts simply weren’t part of their curriculum, and, due to limitations in their ability to bring in topics outside of their schools’ planned curricula, they weren’t able to teach them in their classrooms.

Of the teachers included in this study, three of the six actually taught graphic novels that were a planned piece of their school’s Language Arts curriculum, while two others used graphic texts as part of units where teachers were given their own choice of materials. One of the six was able to create an elective graphic novel course for upper level students in a university creative writing program.

These six teachers fell into two basic camps relating to their experience with graphic texts and their personal interest in them. Amanda, Eric and Frances considered themselves to be heavy readers of graphic novels and spoke often of reading comic books and comic strips as children, with Amanda and Frances relating a family involvement in graphic texts. Frances told me her mother had tried to encourage her to read as a child by

giving her a subscription to *Mad* magazine, while Amanda said her father often liked to read the Sunday comics out loud to her family giving each character a different voice. All three of these teachers showed a familiarity with contemporary graphic novels and actively sought out titles that are considered to be of high literary quality by critics and other readers. Eric and Frances were particularly well-read in the study of comics and graphic novels. They both spoke casually of the theories and methods behind graphic storytelling put forth by authors Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, considered to be two of the leading thinkers on graphic texts or, works they term “sequential art”. These three teachers all felt a strong desire to share their love of graphic novels and comics with their students.

The other three teachers reported almost no interaction with comic books or graphic novels prior to teaching them in their classes and had very little interest in reading them. All three, however, shared a strong professional interest in graphic texts as a teaching tool. Beth, who had brought graphic texts into her class on her own, stated she had “heard other teachers talking about them, and I wanted to find out more.” She had also been introduced to graphic novels through a graduate course in media studies and had heard they were very popular. Christa stated she had “zero interest” and “did not understand the graphic novel phenomenon” but felt using graphic texts was a way “to be current in our field, which is important to me,” while Denise described her interest as “a new way to help kids connect to text.” Christa and Denise also mentioned a “visual literacy” requirement at their grade level that they felt they weren’t very good at teaching and hoped graphic novels would help them address that deficiency.

Teacher Resources

The six teachers were all very consistent in which resources they used in their lesson plans. For example, whether or not a teacher had a classroom set of graphic novels to work with, five of the six teachers brought in or had students themselves bring in graphic novels or comic books they could choose from

to read and study as part of their general overview of the genre, and while introducing the vocabulary and concepts.

To establish this basic framework of the genre, four teachers cited the two-page *Graphic novel /comics terms and concepts* study sheet offered at the *Read, Write, Think* website run by the International Reading Association / National Council of Teachers of English, which gives an extremely basic overview of the genre without accompanying examples of the terms or concepts as they actually appear in graphic texts. One of these four also attended a conference workshop hosted by the National Council of Teachers of English and utilized the notes and information she received there to add the information presented at the *Read, Write, Think* website. She stated:

I went to the NCTE conference specifically looking for some help on working with graphic novels... not that they gave me what I ended up doing, but they gave some terminology and some ideas and then I went ahead and created my own way of using it in class.

Eric and Frances noted using the book *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud as the primary resource for establishing the basic overview of graphic texts. A 215-page text on the art of graphic novels and comics, it explains the history and analyzes the genre in great detail and actually does so using graphic text. It is, in essence, a graphic novel about graphic novels.

In addition to these fundamental resources, Christa, Denise and Frances also reported gathering news articles about the popularity of graphic novels, interviews with artists, and book reviews of graphic novels. These sources came from a wide variety of media such as popular new magazines and newspapers, academic journal articles, radio interviews and documentaries and films about the artists themselves such as *Crumb*, *The Realms of the Unreal*, and *American Splendor*.

Amanda also reported gathering significant amounts of information from peers. She was able to collect background information and graphic novel recommendations from the librar-

ian at her school, exercise ideas from a creative writing teacher who presented graphic texts in her class and some basic information on graphic design from an art teacher.

Another common resource cited by three of the teachers was the students themselves. In addition to speaking with students about the comics, graphic novels and manga they were bringing into the classrooms for their own free reading, the students contributed greatly to overall lessons through active observation and discussion. As one teacher put it:

None of us [teachers] are really expert in [graphic texts]. All that we know is just the stuff that we read ourselves. We tried to talk about elements of design, pleasing images, using variety, novelty, contrast... and we chose a couple of pages to discuss and the kids actually came up with way more interesting things to talk about than I had thought of, such as why the panels were designed the way they were and so they were way more savvy than I was... they just seem naturally more in tune with it.

Analysis of the Texts

The teachers reported a variety of different approaches to ways their classes analyzed graphic texts. All six teachers reported at least some traditional literary analysis of the texts focusing on topics such as character, setting, themes, symbolism, metaphor, plot analysis, etc.. None, however, used traditional literary analysis alone. Most of the teachers ended up mixing elements of other media studies with genre specific elements of graphic texts.

All six teachers began their units with review of concepts and vocabulary, such as “panel,” “frame,” “gutter” and “bleed,” unique to the genre, and had students identify these in the graphic texts they were studying using a variety of worksheets and examples. Four of the six reported using information given on graphic novels from the *Read, Write, Think* website as a basis for this overview, while the other two referenced the Scott McCloud book, *Understanding Comics*. However, with the exception of the university teacher of the graphic novels course who spent

considerable time with her class studying the concepts surrounding the passage of time in sequential art and the six frame-to-frame transitions described by McCloud (moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect and non sequiter), all other teachers moved quickly into analyzing concepts not specific to the genre.

Amanda and Beth reported using or planning to use techniques common in film studies courses such as types of camera shots and angles and relating them to the frames found in graphic novels and comic books. Amanda had students “analyze a close up and its effect, and they had to analyze a long shot, or medium shot or other camera angle that they thought was pretty effective and describe why that was.” Beth was preparing a lesson plan to use next year that will have students take a short story and turn the literary text into graphic text, then use that as a way to introduce film terms and concepts for a film study unit.

Four teachers reported integrating the study of graphic art and design into their analyses of the texts. Eric, who taught at an arts school, stated “many of the students at our school have a strong visual arts background, so they are able to discuss the visual aspects of the graphic novel without a lot of front-loading.” However, even though these students came in with a significant understanding of graphic design, this teacher specifically reviewed with students aspects of visual symbolism as part of the analysis. Christa and Denise, both expressing little or no background in visual arts, discussed artistic and design choices with their students. The students came up with their own ideas as to why certain styles or images were incorporated by an artist, and in particular why the graphic novel they had been studying was drawn in a rather simplistic style, solely in black and white even though the subject matter was very grim and complex. Amanda actually shared some information given to her by an art teacher on the use of color in one particular graphic novel and had her students study “the use of font and its effect: the font style, the font size, and where does it change and why” within the lettering of the dialogue and narrative panels of the texts.

Beyond analyzing the actual texts, Christa, Denise and

Frances felt a need to legitimize or defend the graphic novels and comic books they brought into their classes by analyzing the art-form as a whole through the use of journalistic sources. For example, Christa and Denise, who worked closely together with the same grade-level students at the same school, thought their college-bound students would consider graphic novels to be somehow less intellectually significant and brought in articles, reviews and interviews from the popular news media to justify the popularity and critical acclaim of graphic novels. Frances, who taught a graphic novel course at the university level, also brought in radio interviews of graphic novel artists she had recorded, and brought in a movie about graphic novel and comic book artists to help students understand the artistic complexity of the genre and build an appreciation for the voices of the authors.

Student Exercises

All of the teachers interviewed placed a high value on the creation of the graphic texts by the students themselves and included that creative element in their units. These creative exercises ranged from the quite simple to a much more elaborate telling of a historical narrative. Some teachers utilized smaller exercises at the beginning of their lessons, building up to the larger, more complex projects as students learned more about the genre.

As an introduction to the creation and dynamics of graphic texts, Amanda had her students write a narrative paragraph describing what was happening in a single frame of a graphic novel. The process was then reversed when she had students take a passage they particularly liked of 6-10 paragraphs from a novel her classes had recently read, and create a graphic representation of that scene. A build-up activity Frances used was what she called the “three panel story”, where she gave her students three panels to create “a beginning, a middle and an end to a story” as a way of emphasizing the sequential nature of the medium. Both of these teachers allowed students to draw the representation themselves, or use computer graphics, power

point presentations, collages, stick figures or even work in teams to compensate for the different levels of artistic abilities of the students, a choice repeated by all of the teachers assigning the creation of graphic texts.

Of the longer graphic texts teachers assigned their students to create, Beth and Frances allowed significant choice of topic, Eric and Amanda assigned students to create a first-person narrative and the final two, Christa and Denise, assigned a longer, research-based task focusing on the theme of persecution. While reading Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: Story of a Childhood*, Christa and Denise's students were also studying the use of primary sources for historical research in their social studies class, which also focused on the theme of persecution. Students were then asked to find a primary source to interview about that person's own experience of some sort of persecution in the world and tell that graphically on a single, 11" x 14" piece of paper.

Student Response

Overwhelmingly, teachers reported that students thought the graphic units were fun and a welcome change of pace. As one teacher put it, "I think kids really enjoyed the whole thing, and I think it was new and different for them, and it was valued in the classroom... that this is real text, a real thing to study just as much as 'stupid Odyssey' or something. I think kids really did enjoy it." Though teachers all reported that students particularly enjoyed the creative exercises and the social aspect of that process, even the reading of the materials alone produced high levels of engagement.

Only Amanda and Beth reported that their students would regularly bring comic books and manga into class as items they read in their personal time, and had a large interest in the genre coming into the units. However, even the teachers who hadn't seen much outside reading of graphic novels and comic books among their students reported a high level of engagement with the texts studied in class, as well as students starting to read them on their own. Four of the teachers, all of whom assigned students to read at least one graphic novel of their own choice,

reported that students actively shared and read the graphic novels they had chosen outside of class even though there was no credit or assignment to do so. All teachers reported that many students read ahead of the class assignments, brought creative work home when they weren't required to do so and shared what they were doing with other students.

When asked about which students in particular seemed to engage the most with this genre, the answers were all over the board. Christa and Denise cited boys in general as being particularly engaged, especially those who had been previously disengaged from reading, while Amanda stated that higher academic achievers were more engaged. Frances reported that those students who came in with an interest in traditional superhero comics were particularly engaged, while Beth gave an example of three female students who "considered themselves to be quirky" and read graphic novels and manga most heavily outside of class. Beth also noted a child with Asperger's Syndrome as being noticeably more engaged in the graphic novel unit than in other previous units.

Teachers commonly related that students with a talent for visual arts tended to have a particular interest in the genre. Beth, Christa and Denise noted that certain students who had an affinity for drawing were able to academically shine during the creative projects when those same students had not achieved the same success previously in the class.

Amanda, Beth and Frances reported that students who felt they weren't artistically talented showed the highest level of resistance, but they all explained that the students became less apprehensive when they were told they could have someone else help with drawing or they could use stick figures or magazine cut outs.

The other typically resistant student could be labeled as the high achieving academic who thinks graphic novels and comic books are unworthy of serious study. Christa, Denise and Frances witnessed this in their classes, and, interestingly, these were the three teachers who brought in artist interviews, journalistic stories about the genre, and book reviews to help legitimize

the genre. Also of significance may be the fact that these were three teachers who taught the most advanced students.

Value

After teaching their units on graphic texts, all teachers agreed that there was at least some value to the use of graphic texts in the English classroom. Some teachers were certainly more passionate about the genre than others, but even a teacher who considered herself to be a traditional, back-to-the-basics English teacher saw graphic texts as useful for “certain students”, saying, “part of me says let’s just stick to reading and writing and call it good, but another part of me says there are just some students who don’t get it that way, and they need another way to see it, or read it, or act it out or whatever.” Amanda, Christa, Denise and Frances even specifically said they thought graphic texts should be part of any basic English course.

The most common value teachers saw was in the engagement level of students. All of the teachers except Beth felt their students were significantly more engaged in reading the graphic novels and comic books than when reading traditional texts, with Christa, Denise and Eric reporting that they felt the lower-level readers were particularly more engaged with the graphic texts than traditional texts. As Eric put it, “Graphic novels seem to pull these kids in, and the pictures give them contextual clues that low level readers can use to engage more thoroughly with the text.”

The same three teachers also mentioned that they thought students identified with the contemporary nature of the graphic novels they read as opposed to reading the classics produced several decades or even centuries ago. Christa and Denise added that, since the students often knew more than the teachers about the topic, “it was much more authentic” because students participated more actively in their own inquiry of the topic rather than being fully guided by the teacher.

And, finally, two teachers brought up the practicality of bringing graphic novels into the classroom for their quickness and usefulness. As one of them said:

Because it doesn't take up as much time in class, you can do a unit on a graphic novel in a week or ten days, whereas a print text we spend two weeks or three or four. So I think they're very valuable. And you can hit all of your English standards; you can talk about all the literary analysis aspects, so I think it's great.

Advice / Suggestions

When asked about what they felt would help other teachers become more effective in teaching graphic novels units, all interviewees called for more teacher training. Teachers saw themselves weakest in the vocabulary of the graphic texts and the history of the genre. It was common to hear the teachers speak of peers intimidated by graphic texts. Amanda and Frances mentioned that they were often asked about their graphic novel units by other teachers, but few they had spoken with were comfortable enough to incorporate graphic novels into their own classes. Beth expressed her own discomfort:

I feel like to teach it, I want to be an expert about what I'm teaching ... and [knowing about] the different trends that have appeared in comic books over the years would be helpful and I think you need to know a little bit about art in order to think in visual terms.

Though Beth said she didn't think it necessary for all English teachers to be required to take a course on graphic novels, she thought it would be a good elective course at the graduate level.

Frances felt that English teachers simply need to read more graphic novels to become more familiar with them and feel comfortable in teaching them. "I don't think teachers are necessarily resistant," she said, "but it's out of their comfort zone," and reading more graphic novels could be enough to give the comfort they need.

On the other hand, though, Christa, who felt the students were already familiar with the genre and naturally inclined to-

ward it, said this:

We barely have the background or don't have the vocabulary that would be needed or the knowledge... to teach an elective course on graphic novels, but I don't think it's a bad thing to not be an expert for two or three weeks out of the year. It's a natural and fun place to take a back seat to the students, and they sort of revel in that.

Though she did go on to say she is very interested in visual literacy and thinks learning more about graphic texts would be helpful, the crux of her argument was that teachers didn't have to be experts in everything they brought into their classes.

Conclusion

In speaking with teachers about their experiences teaching graphic texts in the English classroom, I found they observed the same value in using those materials that the research literature supports. All teachers felt their students were very engaged with the materials, often more so than with traditional texts, and they were familiar with the genre and able to speak about it with a surprising depth, often with more depth than the teachers themselves. Most teachers felt their lower-level readers found more success with a highly visual text, and many were able to academically shine during these units in a way they normally didn't in their Language Arts classes, another phenomenon supported by the published research.

Though maybe not as profound as finding a relationship between the graphic genre and increased academic success, all of the teachers found great additional value in graphic texts through their basic practicality. Some were able to bridge the genre with other media studies such as film study, or use them to fulfill visual literacy requirements set forth by their school districts. If nothing else, all teachers were at minimum able to get the same types of instruction out of graphic texts as they were from traditional texts, whether it be studying elements of literature, researching historical periods, or studying topics in

conjunction with courses such as social studies or art classes. And they were able to work through these texts quickly and efficiently, an aspect not to be taken lightly when teachers must meet many requirements in a short period of time.

Additionally, the graphic novel units got students reading outside of class. Teachers frequently saw students passing books back and forth to each other to be read for their own personal enjoyment. How often is that witnessed? The fact that so many students shared and discussed graphic novels outside of class after being introduced to them in class cannot be overlooked. These students made reading and talking about graphic novels a shared, social activity within the context of their personal lives, not simply a chore they were pushed into by teachers as part of academic requirements. If teachers aspire to bring authentic study and materials into the classroom, a genre that students willingly and voluminously read for their own pure enjoyment must be included.

Interestingly, though, teachers often observed students' reluctance at the beginning of their lessons to take these materials seriously and felt a strong need to legitimize the genre as worthy of study. Though students may simply think that what they study in school is fundamentally different from what they enjoy outside of class, the teachers who took the time to study the genre as an art form, its popularity, its techniques, its artists and its critical analysis felt it was a valuable technique in opening up their students to study of the genre and understanding its possibilities.

Having students create their own graphic texts also added interest and classroom accomplishment. Every single teacher devoted class time to these creative projects and all noted an extremely high level of engagement and success among their students. Since students immersed themselves so completely in these projects as fun, almost diversionary tasks, learning became natural, intrinsic and socially valued.

However, the most significant thing I "found" during this study may have been what I didn't find: more teachers teaching graphic novels. Despite the existing research, despite the over-

whelmingly positive experiences these six teachers had with the genre, very few of the teachers approached had ever brought a graphic text into their classrooms, and those that did often did so on their own. Some noted an inability to do so because their district assigned all readings and had not assigned a graphic text, but many reported that they simply didn't know much about the genre. Of the six teachers interviewed, five spoke of colleagues that they interacted with who had expressed an interest in the use of graphic texts as teaching materials, or praised the participating teachers for their use of graphic texts, but avoided teaching those texts themselves due to their own discomfort. Even those teachers interviewed who had gone out on a limb to teach these texts felt a need to dig further and learn more about the genre to overcome feelings of not being prepared for it. Though multiple teachers explained the students were more than capable of studying this genre even without much expertise offered by the teacher, there was still a distinct uneasiness they felt toward the genre.

Implications for future research

Since I found so few teachers who had taught graphic texts in the classroom, I think it would be valuable to research why these texts are not being brought there. Since it was reported that teachers either had no choice as to whether or not they could bring graphic texts into their classes or felt uneasy about teaching the genre, it may be helpful to study why school districts are not including graphic texts into the curriculum despite the documented popularity and usefulness, or what effects a course in graphic texts might have on teacher behavior and practices.

From the perspective of students' use of graphic texts, it would be interesting to investigate the reading of comic books and graphic novels as a shared, social activity among students and the impact that has on the students as readers and their success in the classroom. There may also be other social or cultural benefits outside of their academic lives that are derived from this social reading practice as well.

Another area of possible research may be to study in more

depth whether or not the creation of graphic texts by students has any correlation to academic success. The students clearly enjoyed the creative projects, but do those projects bring any added benefits to Language Arts instruction outside of increased engagement? Though my focus was on a qualitative study to find out what teachers were doing with graphic texts, the next logical step would be to study those techniques from a quantitative standpoint to measure the effects of those techniques.

And finally, with all of the benefits of bringing graphic texts into the classroom combined with the lack of confidence expressed by the teachers regarding this genre, I think studying the effects of more teacher training would be helpful to get the most out of these powerful materials. Though many teacher training programs now expose graduate students to graphic novels, particularly in adolescent literature courses, many of the teachers I spoke with still expressed a discomfort with the genre, suggesting that they could benefit from more academic study of the genre. It may be helpful to offer current teachers single-day seminars or trainings brought into conferences and meetings to review these materials and share resources. School districts should also look more closely into assigning graphic texts as part of their set curricula. Regardless of how it is done, though, teachers and their students can only benefit from the study of graphic texts in the classroom, and it's a shame more are not taking advantage.

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Appendix A

Graphic Novels, Comic Books and Resources Recommended for Classroom Use

A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories by Will Eisner. Features four stories set in a New York tenement during the 1930s exploring the complex issues of life. Often mistakenly called the first graphic novel, this is considered a major landmark of the genre.

American Born Chinese by Gene Luen Yang. A Printz Award winner and National Book Award in the Young Peoples Literature category, this book combines three converging plot lines about a second generation immigrant whose parents are from Taiwan, the Monkey king of Chinese folklore and a white boy, whose Chinese cousin embodies every negative Chinese stereotype imaginable.

American Splendor by Harvey Pekar. An autobiographic comic book series depicting Pekar's own everyday life. Later turned into an award-winning movie in 2003.

Aya by Marguerite Abouet and Clement Oubrerie. This graphic novel depicts the lives of teenage girls growing up in the Ivory Coast during the late-1970s before the country descended into civil unrest.

Blankets by Craig Thompson. An autobiographical graphic novel following the author's life from childhood to early adulthood in an Evangelical Christian family. *Blankets* was named by *Time* magazine as one of the Top Ten Graphic Novels of All Time.

Buddha by Osamu Tezuka. Known as the "Walt Disney of Manga" for his widespread influence in Japan, Tezuka's graphic biography of Buddha includes a large cast of original

characters whose exploits underscore Buddhist concepts.

City of Glass, The Graphic Novel by Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli. A graphic adaptation of Paul Auster's 1985 existential mystery novel named by *The Comics Journal* as one of the 100 Best Comics of the Century.

Epileptic by David B. This visually adventurous graphic memoir illustrates the life of the author growing up with an epileptic brother in the Loire Valley of France surrounded by a solitary world of fantasy and fear.

Exit Wounds by Rutu Modan. A graphic novel about terrorism in Israel wherein a cab driver learns his father was killed by a suicide bomber and searches for clues as to what really happened to him.

Ghostworld by Daniel Clowes. This graphic novel tells the story of two cynical teenage girls whose friendship slowly drifts apart. A film adaptation, slightly different from the graphic novel, was made in 2001.

Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth by Chris Ware explores the theme of alienation in families as experienced by the main character and his grandfather. This graphic novel has won multiple book awards in the U.S. and Britain.

Love and Rockets by Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez. This comic book series features multiple long-running storylines interspersed with short stories and one-offs. Its two main storylines, referred to as *Palomar* and *Hoppers 13*, are set in a fictional Latin-American city and a fictional city in California following the lives and relationships of a large cast of realistic, complex characters.

Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History & Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Begin. The Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning memoir documents his father's experience of the holocaust and his own struggle to con-

nect with the man he never fully understood.

Palestine by Joe Sacco. This piece of graphic journalism gives an account of life in Palestine and a history of the Intifada and Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Persepolis: Story of a Childhood & Persepolis 2: Story of a Return by Marjane Satrapi. Part One of this graphic memoir tells the story of Satrapi's childhood in Iran during the cultural and political upheaval of the Iran-Iraq War, while Part Two follows the author's high school years in Europe and her subsequent return to Iran.

The Sandman by Neil Gaiman. A critically-acclaimed, cult favorite comic book series, *The Sandman* follows a family of seven anthropomorphic abstract concepts: Destiny, Death, Dream, Destruction, Desire, Despair and Delirium, often featuring characters from history, mythology and religion.

Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art by Scott McCloud. This graphic novel about graphic novels gives a history and analysis of "sequential art", setting out an academic vocabulary specific to the genre and details the complex ways words and images interact. Most appropriate for high school students.

The Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. A grim deconstruction of superheroes and the moral codes associated with them, this Hugo Award winner explores the themes of authority and social power.

Graphic Novel/Comics Terms and Concepts at the Read, Write, Think website. www.readwritethink.org/lesson_images/lesson1102/terms.pdf - Helpful background vocabulary for any unit on graphic texts.

Appendix B

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Describe your personal experience with graphic novels and / or comic books.
2. Describe your experience with graphic texts in the classroom.
3. If used in the classroom, describe the methods you used to teach them.
4. How do those methods differ from those used with traditional texts?
5. What topics have you covered during your lessons with graphic texts?
6. Describe your observations of students' involvement with graphic novels and comic books.
7. Have you had any feedback from parents about their opinions on graphic texts in the classroom?
8. Have you had any feedback from other teachers about their opinions on graphic texts in the classroom?
9. Is there a typical student who tends to engage more with graphic texts?
10. What is your opinion the value of graphic texts within the English curriculum?
11. Is there a need for any special preparation needed by teachers in order to teach graphic texts effectively?