Discover A New World of Reading: Making the Case for Graphic Novels as "Real" Books in Secondary Education

Amanda Melilli

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, amanda.melilli@unlv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/libfacpresentation

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Repository Citation
Melilli, A. (2019, May). Discover A New World of Reading: Making the Case for Graphic Novels as "Real" Books in Secondary Education. Presentation at Summit on the Pedagogy for YA Literature in the English Language Arts Classroom & Library, Las Vegas, NV.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/libfacpresentation/181

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Faculty/Staff Scholarship & Research at Digital Scholarship@UNLV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty Presentations by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.
DISCOVER A NEW WORLD OF READING

Making the Case for Graphic Novels as “Real” Books in Secondary Education

Amanda Melilli
Head, Teacher Development & Resources Library
**DEFINITIONS**

**Sequential Art:** “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer” (McCloud, 1993, p. 9).

**Comics:** A medium of narrative storytelling/information sharing which uses sequential art.

**Comic Books:** Magazine style, individual issues of content in the comic medium.

**Graphic Novels:** Bound volumes of content in the comic medium. Sometimes made up of multiple comic books. Sometimes an entire work unto themselves.
THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY
“The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete, they make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2009).

Adichie was talking about stories in relation to people, but it applies to how we see the world in general.
What do you think of when you hear the word COMICS?
Is it something like this?
What about this?
Or this?
This?

Ben Katchor
Graphic Novelist
New York, NY

Alison Bechdel
Cartoonist and Graphic Memoirst
Expanding the expressive potential of the graphic form in intricate narratives that explore the complexities of familial relationships.
Batten, VT

Lauren Redniss
Artist and Writer
Fusing artwork, written text, and design in a unique approach to visual nonfiction that enriches the ways in which stories can be conveyed, experienced, and understood.
New York, NY

Gene Luen Yang
Graphic Novelist
Bringing diverse people and cultures to children’s and young adult literature and confirming comics’ place as an important creative and imaginative force within literature, art, and education.
San Jose, CA
Or even this?
WHY ONE STORY AND NOT THE OTHER?

Easiest story to find. It’s everywhere.

These stories take effort to be exposed to.
WHY DO WE EQUATE COMICS TO BEING JUVENILE?

A Quick History Lesson
WHAT EDUCATORS WERE STARTING TO SEE...

- Favorite leisure reading activity for kids (Witty, 1941).
- Led kids to create their own comics (Witty, 1941).
- Good for “remedial readers” (Hutchinson, 1949; Sones, 1944; Strang, 1943)
- Could link kids to traditional books or subjects based on comic book interest. (Hutchinson, 1949; Sones, 1944; Strang, 1943)
- Could be applied to subjects across the curriculum (Hutchinson, 1949)
- Contained substantial grade level reading experiences (Thorndike, 1941).
- Made different subjects more interesting than “formal” education (Hutchinson, 1949)
- Important for meeting the reading needs of all readers (Sones, 1944).
- Important for social/emotional development (Bender, 1944)
SO WHAT HAPPENED?
New genres were introduced with a target on a new reading audience:

- Older teens who grew up on superhero comics as kids.
- Veterans returning home from WWII.

While publishers intended these new genres for older audiences, it did not stop youth from getting a hold of them:

“Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, librarians, educators, police officers, pharmacists, religious leaders, and many other concerned adults spoke out about children’s seemingly **insatiable reading appetite** for the inexpensive, four-color tales of superheroes, funny animals, jungle queens, and gangsters” (Tilley, 2012, p. 388-389)
Seduction of the Innocent, 1954

- Any comic that depicted crime contributed to juvenile delinquency.
- A public health concern.
- Praised by librarians, child advocates, literary critics, etc.\(^1\)
- Book of the year by the National Education Association.\(^1\)

Expert witness for the televised Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (1954).

\(^1\) (Tilley, 2012, p. 384-385)
COMIC CODE AUTHORITY

- Comic book industry’s attempt to escape government regulation.
- “Comics books received the Seal of Approval only if they were suitable for the youngest readers” (Nyberg, 2019)
- Determined who would sell issues and advertisements.
- Officially ended in 2011.

(Nyberg, 2019)
AND DON'T WORRY...

Wertham falsified much of his “findings.”


“This article documents specific examples of how Wertham manipulated, overstated, compromised, and fabricated evidence—especially that evidence he attributed to personal clinical research with young people—for rhetorical gain” (p. 383)
ISSUES WITH COMICS TODAY

Society still predominantly sees comics as being juvenile reading activity.

But in education...

Pictures = Cheating!!!
READING LEVEL METRICS CANNOT ACCOUNT FOR THE COMPLEXITY OF READING IMAGES

(Melilli, & Green, 2018)
IT’S TIME TO CHANGE THE SINGLE STORY

Comics are a Complex Narrative Format
Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art

- Published in 1993.
- Considered a foundational piece in the analysis of sequential art.
- Written in the comics medium.
- Addresses the mental effort needed by the reader to create meaning.
McCloud expands on Gestalt’s principle of closure: “Observing the parts but perceiving the whole.”

The reader is a part of the meaning making experience:

“There lies a medium of communication and expression which uses closure like no other... A medium where the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion” (McCloud, 1993, p.65).
McCloud - Transitions in the Gutter

Moment to Moment

Action to Action

Subject to Subject

(Walden, 2018, p. 532)

(Chanani, 2017, p. 11)

(Medina, Robinson, Jennings, & Stevenson, 2017, p. 2)
Scene to Scene

Drowning. Kirby. It seems like years since Sunday morning. So much has happened.

On Sunday evening, I came back home from a stroll with Maki, and found Mafuyu and

Sharper in the dark. Mafuyu was crying and Sharper was helping her.

Non-Sequitur:

Aspect to Aspect:

(As they talked, a clock with a face was shown.)

As they talked, a clock with a face was shown.

Non-Sequitur:

(An image of a comic strip showing a character named Cheese was shown.)

(Folman, A., Frank, A., & Polonsky, D., 2018, p. 16)  
(Tagame, 2017, p. 91)  
(McCloud, 1993, p. 72)
Panels do not necessarily represent a single moment in time.

(Georges, 2017, p.139)
Panels can be used in different ways to give a sense of time.
Dialogue and images do not have to take place at the same time or place.
COMPLEX YET EFFICIENT STORYTELLING

Monstress Vol. 2
- Worldbuilding
- Character building
- 4 different conversations told on one page.

What made it effective in this format instead of prose?

Bonus: What image do you have in your head? Is it of the entire deck of the ship even though you never saw it in its entirety?

(Liu, 2017, p. 35)
Visual Languages exists and are bound by their own grammar.

The brain processes this grammar in similar cognitive ways as other languages.

“Different domains make use of the same cognitive resources..., but do so in ways that are unique to their particular modalities” (Cohn, 2013, p. 133).
Cohn - Methods

Developing theories on the types of knowledge our minds use to make sense of drawings and visual language. These theories provide the foundation for...

Psychology experiments examining the comprehension of drawings and sequential images both testing behavior (reaction times, ratings, etc.) and directly measuring processing in the brain (EEG, fMRI, etc.).

Comparative analysis of visual languages from across the world by coding the properties within comics, leading to cross-cultural comparisons.

(Cohn, n.d.a)
“Transitions cannot account for connections between panels that extend beyond adjacent relationships” (Cohn, 2013, p. 67).

The reader is not just creating meaning between two panels in the gutter but across the entire narrative. How?

**Visual Narrative Grammar**

“Languages use a system of rules and constraints for sequential expressions of meaning” (Cohn, 2013, p. 4).
Panels serve grammatical functions:

(Cohn, 2015, p. 15)
**COHN - EFFECTS ON COGNITIVE PROCESSING**

**N 400 effect**
Violation of meaning.
Ex. *The cat* **baked** *the food.*

**P600 effect**
Violation of syntax.
Ex. *The cat* **eating** *the food.*

*The cat* **baking** *the food.*

Evokes both an N400 & P600 effect *(Cohn, 2013, p125-126)*

(Cohn, et al., 2012, p. 41).
Structural and dual violations used “initials” panels instead of “peak” panels.

Panels that violated the structural grammar evoked a P600 effect, but not those with semantic violations. (Cohn, 2013, p. 128).

Evoked the same N400 and P600 effects as when reading meaning/grammatical errors in written language.

(Cohn, et al., 2013, p. 125).
Cohn proposes that understanding visual narrative grammar involves developing fluency:

- Found a correlation between brain waves/reaction times and graphic novel reading experience (Cohn, 2014).
- Studies in Japan by Jun Nakazawa found (as cited by Cohn, 2103, p. 111):
  - Inference abilities increase with age and comic reading experience.
  - Comic reading experience positively impacts eye-movement.
  - Comic reading experience positively impacts comprehension and recall.
GRAPHIC NOVELS ARE NOT "CHEATING"
Complex Narrative Medium

- Comic illustrations do not simply illustrate the text. Require active inference from the reader to create meaning (McCloud).

- Comic narratives have a visual grammar which require readers to use similar cognitive functioning as verbal grammar in order to process (Cohn).

- The comic medium requires practice and exposure in order to develop fluency (Cohn & Nakazawa).

And we haven’t even gotten to the importance of multimodal literacy development and the impact on reading motivation!
Worth a Thousand Words: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Visual and Verbal Literacy (Jaffe & Hurwich, 2019.

The multimodal nature of graphic novels:

- Increases vocabulary and language use.
- Increases visual literacy.
- Is effective at teaching literary devices.
- Reinforces sequencing skills.
- Increases comprehension and critical thinking.
- Enhances memory.
Remember This?

- Favorite leisure reading activity for kids (Witty, 1941).
- Led kids to creating their own comics (Witty, 1941).
- Good for “remedial readers” (Hutchinson, 1949; Sones, 1944; Strang, 1943)
- Could link kids to traditional books or subjects based on comic book interest. (Hutchinson, 1949; Sones, 1944; Strang, 1943)
- Could be applied to subjects across the curriculum (Hutchinson, 1949)
- Contained substantial grade level reading experiences (Thorndike, 1941).
- Made different subjects more interesting than “formal” education (Hutchinson, 1949)
- Important for meeting the reading needs of all readers (Sones, 1944).
- Important for social/emotional development (Bender, 1944)

More and more research is backing up these claims today
WHERE DO I START?
How do I become a better evaluator of books representing Indigenous identities?

- Read 100 books by indigenous authors. (Jones, Smith, Gansworth, Quigley, & Bruchac, 2018)

Can be applied to any unfamiliar area of literature, including graphic novels.

Make it a goal to read 100 graphic novels!
Format does not equate to genre

Pick graphic novels based on how you would pick a prose book. What genres/topics do you like?

- Literary adaptations
- Memoir
- Autobiography/biography
- Nonfiction
- Informational
- Coming of Age
- Slice of Life
- Contemporary Realistic Fiction
- Super Heroes
- Fantasy
- Sci-Fi
- Mystery
- Horror

Remember: If you are new to graphic novels, you will need to develop some comic fluency. Some titles will be harder to read than others. Stick with it!
WHERE TO FIND GRAPHIC NOVEL SUGGESTIONS?

YALSA’s Great Graphic Novels for Teens:
http://www.ala.org/yalsa/great-graphic-novels

Eisner Awards:
https://www.comic-con.org/awards/eisner-awards-current-info

No Flying No Tights: http://www.noflyingnotights.com/

The TDRL Children’s/Young Adult Literature Guide:
http://guides.library.unlv.edu/cyalit/gn
Our job is to educate ourselves AND others.

What single story do your administrators, colleagues, and parents know when it comes to **COMICS**?

What can you do to change that single story?
Comics referenced in presentation (Page 1)


COMICS REFERENCED IN PRESENTATION (PAGE 2)


Alternate Reality Comics. (2019). Retrieved from https://scontent-lax3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/59881913_10157693233028465_6930416347595669504_o.jpg?_nc_cat=104&_nc_ht=scontent-lax3-1.xx&oh=6d90e896145088c93e8c5ad6895b1a94&oe=5D6F48FA.


QUESTIONS?