**The Value of Graphic Novels: Furthering the Cause of Information Literacy**

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## **Abstract**

Graphic novels have come a long way since being regarded as comic books unworthy of use beyond being a quick read by young people. A literature review of the use of graphic novels reveals that the use of graphic novels has moved far beyond appealing to the visual learner. In addition to serving the recreational reading needs of children and adults, today’s educators are using them to support reading comprehension and enhance the learning process of English-language learners. They are also used to assist visual learners and to entice reluctant readers and struggling students. Beyond building literacy into the students’ education, they support development of the multimodal skills needed for future success in the 21st Century workplace. The authors highlight the multiple ways that graphic novels are currently being used in and out of the classroom for adults and students alike.

**Defining Graphic Novels, Manga, Comic, and Comic Books**

***Graphic Novels***

In 1978, cartoonist Will Eisner coined the term “graphic novel” which he used to characterize his novel, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. Graphic novels came to symbolize long works of a monographic, self-contained story that had never been serialized. This “sequential art” was a means of creative expression that dealt with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea (Affleck 30).

***Manga***

Evidence of the word “manga” (Japanese comics) was first noted in the 1770’s. Loosely translated, it means “whimsical pictures,” and was popularized by Japanese printer Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1819) in 1814 (Masuchika 512). Manga was and is an arrangement of highly detailed and image-driven pictures that are usually monochromatic and lack the lengthy dialogue that characterizes Western comics. The panels are arranged in a distinctly different order which requires the reader to “read” them from bottom right to upper left, the exact opposite of Western comic panels which are “read” from upper left to bottom right (Downey 184).

***Comics and Comic Books***

Beginning in the 1890’s, comics were featured in newspapers as a way of boosting circulation. They were rarely “proper” and often deliberately vulgar but were valued as entertainment. Comic books, usually serialized magazines of 32-48 pages, came into prominence in the early 1930’s when a series of cartoon strips of Superman that had previously been published in newspapers were bound into a single volume (Wagner 43). Will Eisner’s early famous work, “The Spirit,” was published weekly beginning in 1940 as a newspaper supplement. When Eisner was drafted during World War II, the U.S. Government engaged him to create a series of comic books on safety and preventative maintenance for soldiers (Humphrey 76). This was among the first use of comics as an educational tool.

**Uses of Graphic Novels, Manga, Comics and Comic Books**

***K-12 Classrooms***

Formal literacy training usually begins with children’s picture books which are a happy marriage of prose and pictures that illustrate what is being said in the story. The use of comic books and graphic novels in K-12 classrooms as early developmental reading tools has been growing in popularity. (Rapp 64) Teachers encourage children to retell the story by examining the pictures. This in turn enhances vocabulary and visual literacy skills, and improves comprehension and interpretation of themes and social issues. Comics and graphic novels were incorporated into Common Core State Standards and in 2010, when states began adopting the standards, the use of graphic novels in the classroom took off (Gavigan 39).

Educators use graphic novels to develop vocabulary, composition, and comprehension among students. They also incorporate multiple approaches when using graphic novels in the classroom. One cross-curricular approach pairs English with history or social studies and cultural classes. Some classes use titles such as the 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel, *Maus*, by American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, to discuss political or social events. A second approach is the use of graphic novels to enhance comprehension and analysis of traditional texts (Downey 184). This is especially useful in teaching STEM subjects with which both English speaking students and English language learners traditionally struggle. Comic books and heavily illustrated trade books can help strengthen students’ understanding of concepts and practices. Background knowledge and providing the motivation to ask questions and validate results that support scientific explorations can all result from the use of graphic novels in the classroom setting (Ardasheva 40). A third approach is called the “contact zone theory.” Teachers and students are asked to look at current events and controversial topics from multiple viewpoints and belief systems and then discuss their views. Topics such as terrorism and September 11, or what constitutes a “family,” in particular lend themselves to this method (Downey 184). In middle schools, students who have trouble with unfamiliar academic vocabulary involved in scientific content may find graphic illustrations of unfamiliar scientific concepts particularly helpful. Side-by-side text and visual representations are also desirable (Ardasheva 40).

Teenagers, a traditionally hard audience to engage, are drawn to graphic novels. By using them for education purposes, the teacher is assured of capturing the students’ attention. Using graphic novels has been described by Kerry Ireland as having a kind of domino effect: teens get pleasure from reading comics and graphic novels which leads them to willingly continue reading. This is actually a practicing of their reading skills which in turn develops better literacy skills and leads to achievement in other areas (Ireland 18). At the high school level, teachers have used graphic novels to supplement lessons in literature, history, social awareness, and writing classes to further students’ understanding of basic subject concepts (Williams 171).

An example of an assignment that incorporates sequential art into the curriculum is an English class where the teacher assigned students to read an article that had comic elements. They were then asked to draw their own interpretation of the article using a comic format after they’d completed a unit on graphic novels (Schwaller 122).

***Higher Education***

During the last two decades, there has been a marked increase in the use of sequential art in the teaching of scientific curriculums in institutions of higher education. In 2011, University of Nevada - Las Vegas librarian Steven Hoover mapped comics-based activities to the ACRL Information Literacy Competence Standards and to ACRL’s Image Resources Interest Group’s standards. By mapping ACRL standards to comics-based activities, comics-based instruction was shown to be a valuable resource for information instruction and research (Hoover 179). The first comic to be published in the prestigious journal, *The Annals of Internal Medicine*, appeared in March, 2013. It was written by Michael J. Green, illustrated by Ray Rieck, and was titled “Missed It.” Interestingly enough, the word “comic” was never used. Green alternately described his article as a “graphic novel,” a “graphic article,” or an “article in graphic format.” This terminology was meant to elevate the article’s cultural status to a piece that would appeal to academics who previously disapproved of the classroom use of the popular medium of “comics.”

***English as Second Language and Non-Native Language Learners***

The use of comics was one of the leading ways for early twentieth century American immigrants to learn English (Matz 331). Comics use repetitive images and recognizable symbols to project the author’s story and become vocabulary prompts for non-English speakers. When used again and again, they can be thought of as becoming their own language which the reader then interprets in an effort to understand the story. During this interpretative process, the reader’s key critical thinking skills are honed during an analysis of the story’s plot. This method has been referred to as decoding since this approach to the sequential art creates the language of the graphic novel. Learning how to decode involves developing an understanding of the graphic novels’ conventions and becoming experienced at synthesizing the images and textual information of the story. The examination of print and pictures encourages the reader to look for new content whose diversity can suggest new meanings to readers (Hoover 178).

***Popular Culture, Movies and Television Script Sources***

Although graphic novels have been blamed for contributing to juvenile delinquency and attacked for their depictions of violence, the fact remains that they are a popular source of entertainment among young people and adults (Pinkley 5). As a literary medium, themes, styles, and stories abound that can be communicated through them. In 2002, Stephen Weiner published an article, “Beyond Superheroes: Comics Get Serious,” wherein he identified six graphic novel genres: the superhero story, manga, nonfiction, adaptations or spinoffs, human interest, and satire.

The superhero, arguably the most recognizable and popular genre, takes a recognized comic book hero and puts him in a stand-alone story. Action adventure graphics can be set in a variety of locations, time period, and worlds. They feature “everyman” type of characters who are put in exciting stories. Science fiction graphics, much like their counterpart novels, movies, and television shows, can take the reader to other worlds through time and space travel, with robots and aliens, to life on earth and to the future. The fantasy genre stories are set in magical places where the reader encounters dragons and other mystic creatures such as those found in Tolkien’s *Hobbit* series. Crime and mystery graphic novels explore criminal acts, the criminal underworld, or nonfiction true crime stories. The 2002 movie, *Road to Perdition*, was from a graphic novel of the same name by Max Collins. Horror graphic novels usual feature supernatural creatures such as vampires, ghosts, zombies, and other monsters. Popular television shows like *“Buffy the Vampire Slayer,”* and *“Angel”* have been turned into graphic novels.

Even “classic” literature such as novels by Jane Austen, Mary Shelley’s “*Frankenstein*,” Homer’s *The Odyssey*,” and authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Charles Dickens, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and William Shakespeare, have had the works turned into graphic novels.

**The Formal Study of Graphic Novels, Manga, Comics and Comic Books**

***Institutions of Higher Education***

For the serious student of sequential art, there are institutions of higher education such as Portland State University, the University of Oregon, and the University of Florida, who move beyond simply offering classes in comic books and the graphic novel. These institutions offer degrees and certificates and have concentrated curriculums of “Comics Studies,” and “Comics and Cartoon Studies.” Portland State University’s program <<http://www.pdx.edu/comics-studies/>> is interdisciplinary, and prepares students to work in the field of comics and cartoon art as writers, artists, and scholars. Its certification program is under the guidance of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and draws faculty from the English Department and World Languages and Literatures. Adjunct faculty round out the teaching faculty: men and women who are actively engaged in the creation, printing and online publishing of comics. Internships at established graphic novel publishing houses are also available.

The “Comics & Cartoon Studies” program <<http://comics.uoregon.edu/>> at the University of Oregon has faculty who come from departments such as the “Department of English,” “Japanese & Comparative Film and Popular Culture,” and the “Arts Administration Program.” Their interdisciplinary Comics and Cartoon Studies minor was the first of its kind in the nation and according to the university’s website, presents students with an international, historical, and critical perspective on the art of comics from editorial cartoons to comic books to graphic novels. Students produce *Art Ducko,* a comics magazine which showcases their graphic arts and creative writing skills, and gives them creative teamwork experience while publishing their own original comics.

The University of Florida’s Department of English <<http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/>> offers classes, hosts an annual conference on comics, produces the ImageTexT journal <<http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/imagetext.shtml>> and sponsors the Comix-Scholars list-serve <<http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/scholars/>>. Masters of Arts and PhD students can choose the Comics and Visual Rhetoric track when pursuing a degree. Participants in the program study comics, animation, and other forms of visual rhetoric in North America.

***Nonprofit and Commercial Organizations***

The Institute for Comic Studies <<http://www.comicstudies.com/>> is an organization that dedicates itself to the “promotion of the study, understanding, recognition and cultural legitimacy of comics.” Their website describes their activities, among them being conferences, symposia, and other forms of academic presentation and idea exchange, primarily at comic conventions as well as more traditional venues. They maintain contact with both American and international comics publishers, scholars, institutions, and organizations in order to serve as a source of communication and contact for comics. They introduce scholars, professionals, and others with similar interests to one another, and promote publications and other works focused on comics and the study of comics.

The Center for Cartoon Studies <<http://www.cartoonstudies.org/index.php/programs/>> is located in Vermont. It is approved to grant MFA degrees and One-and Two-Year Certificates by the State of Vermont Department of Education but it is not accredited by any governing body. It offers a Two-Year Master of Fine Arts degree or a Master of Fine Arts in Applied Cartooning, One-and Two-Year Certificates, and summer workshops. The Center also offers the option to complete the second year of the program in what is termed “low residency” which is characterized by online and correspondence courses. An academic year is nine months, and after completing the first year certificate program (30 credits, 9 classes), the second year program revolves around a yearlong thesis project which can be completed on location or by distance. All programs are full-time enrollment with no part-time status being available. The Center also doesn’t accept credits from outside institutions.

**Acquisitions and Classification of Comics and Graphic Novels**

***Acquisitions***

“Do comic books belong in libraries?” was a question that was posed by Michael R. Lavin, in his 1998 article, "Comic Books and Graphic Novels for Libraries: What to Buy." This question was raised primarily in the public and school library context. But why comic books in academic libraries? In the 1990 book, *Comics Librarianship: a Handbook,* author Randall Scottstates, “Attitudes about comics within libraries and within the academic community are the second general problem confronting the library acquisitions program.” (10)

As far back as the 70s, the question of comic books and graphic novels in libraries has been a perplexing one. Do they belong in libraries or in collectors’ personal libraries? Should this genre be taken seriously as a form of literature. At Indiana State University (ISU) library, comic books and graphic novels were not taken very seriously until 2003-2004. At this time, an area of the browsing collection was dedicated to the comic books and graphic novels and a fund code was assigned specifically to the collection development for this genre. Once the change was made, it became apparent that series such as Hergé’s “Les aventures de Tintin” and Goscinny’s “Une Aventure d'Astérix,” (previously placed in the education and teaching materials area because they were used by future teachers of French) would be removed from that location and would be placed in the browsing collection. Another reason ISU library collects graphic novels is to satisfy our undergraduate audience’s recreational reading needs.

In their 2011 article, “Graphic Novels in Libraries Supporting Teacher Education and Librarianship Programs,” authors Virginia Kay Williams and Damen Peterson, offer the observation that “As librarians noticed that teenagers, traditionally a hard audience to reach, read graphic novels, the library literature began to feature lists of good graphic novels, tips on developing graphic novel collections, and anecdotes about teenagers’ insatiable demand for graphic novels.” (166)

***Cataloging***

When it comes down to cataloging the graphic novels collection, the struggle that catalogers face is not unique to the ISU library. What makes the situation complex is that the ISU library acquires (collects) at multiple levels—for adults and children. Collection development is done by two selectors or liaisons, one for the adult collection, with a focus on the department of language, literature and linguistics, and the other for the children’s collection, with emphasis on the education and teaching materials area. Because of local practices and decisions made years ago, these two collections are classified using Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and the Library of Congress Classification (LC). The ISU library uses multiple classification schemas. The DDC is used for all materials going into the education and teaching materials area. The LC is used for most materials going into the general stacks, the browsing area, or the reference collection. ISU library classes all comic books and graphic novels for the education and children materials in 741.59 or 741.5973. The catalogers have to pay extra attention to the subjects assigned to each item by the LC to make sure a correct call number is assigned. To assure that all comic books and graphic novels would go into the browsing collection area, catalogers decided to use LC PN6727. Catalogers continue to struggle when it comes to comic books and graphic novels because, at times, the rules are not as clear and they could be. Lists such as described in the article “Sample title/DDC list: 741.5 Comic books, graphic novels, fotonovelas, cartoons, caricatures, comic strips,” by Julianne Beall, Assistant Editor, DDC, come in handy as a ready-to-use tool when cataloging materials in the education/teaching materials area. LC call numbers present another set of issues for the catalogers. The main rule of thumb is to pay extra attention to the subjects and at the same time try to follow local, in house rules.

**Summary**

The use of graphic novels, manga, comics and comic books as a tool for education, building literacy skills, supporting reading comprehension, and enhancing the learning process of non-native English speakers has exploded in popularity, especially within the last couple of decades. The appeal of these formats to children and adults alike is well documented in the literature. They present a lot of programming opportunities for libraries and in the classroom by encouraging the reader to explore the high-quality comic books and graphic novels that exist for every reading level and every type of interest. In the popular field of manga, devoted readers of that comic art form are actually learning Japanese so they can read the newest manga straight off the press without having to wait for translations. In short, graphic novels, manga, comics and comic books have earned their place of prominence among educators who further the cause of information literacy and the audience whom they serve.

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