Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels

Gretchen Schwarz offers a rationale, based on the need for current students to learn multiple literacies, for the use of graphic novels in the high school English class. She highlights several titles, suggests possible classroom strategies, and discusses some of the obstacles teachers may face in adding graphic novels to their curriculum.

Time has arrived to broaden the canons of traditional education and the curriculum. . . . Using critical pedagogy to integrate the new forms of visual and electronic “texts” represents a curriculum requiring new competencies and a new definition of what constitutes learning as well as how and when it takes place.

—Laudislaus M. Semali, Literacy in Multimedia America: Integrating Media Education across the Curriculum

The graphic novel now offers English language arts teachers opportunities to engage all students in a medium that expands beyond the traditional borders of literacy. The graphic novel, a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a “real” book, is increasingly popular, available, and meaningful. Library media specialists have been in the forefront advocating graphic novels. For example, Maureen Mooney declares, “If you acquire graphic novels, young adults will come.” Mooney adds that graphic novels appeal to various readers, offer all kinds of genres, help students develop critical thinking, and encourage literacy (18). Literary critics are also taking note. Lev Grossman observes, “Yet some of the most interesting, most daring, most heartbreaking art being created right now, of both the verbal and visual varieties, is being published in graphic novels. These books take on memory, alienation, film noir, child abuse, life in post-revolutionary Iran and, of course, love” (56). In addition, Standards for the English Language Arts promotes a wide variety of texts, “print and nonprint,” facility with “visual language,” and participation in a “variety of literacy communities” (NCTE and IRA 3). The time has come for secondary English teachers to explore and use the graphic novel to build multiple literacies.

First, the graphic novel is helpful in promoting the goals of traditional literacy. Getting students reading is one benefit, as literacy expert Stephen D. Krashen argues in his latest edition of The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research. Educators have also urged the use of comics as an alternative, appealing way for students to analyze literary conventions, character development, dialogue, satire, and language structures as well as develop writing and research skills. Rocco Versaci adds that graphic novels appeal to various readers, offer all kinds of genres, help students develop critical thinking, and encourage literacy (18). Literary critics are also taking note. Lev Grossman observes, “Yet some of the most interesting, most daring, most heartbreaking art being created right now, of both the verbal and visual varieties, is being published in graphic novels. These books take on memory, alienation, film noir, child abuse, life in post-revolutionary Iran and, of course, love” (56). In addition, Standards for the English Language Arts promotes a wide variety of texts, “print and nonprint,” facility with “visual language,” and participation in a “variety of literacy communities” (NCTE and IRA 3). The time has come for secondary English teachers to explore and use the graphic novel to build multiple literacies.

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Increasingly, scholars and teachers realize that in a media-dominated society, one traditional literacy—reading and writing of print—is no longer sufficient. Today’s young people also have to read films, TV shows, magazines, and Web sites. Both practical information and the stories of our culture come from many media, especially those made possible by current technology. Donna E. Alvermann and Margaret C. Hagood argue, “As a result of the greater demands that students face in New Times, they must acquire the analytic tools necessary for critically ‘reading’ all kinds of media texts—film, video, MTV, the Internet, and so on; hence, our interest in incorporating critical media literacy in school curricula” (203). Both traditional, alphabetic literacy and literacies such as information, visual, and media literacy can be well served by classroom engagement with the graphic novel.

The graphic novel is a medium that combines the visual and verbal as do films, TV, and even pop-up ads. The graphic novel, however, holds still and allows special attention to be given to its unique visual and word arrangement. As Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons declare in The Language of Comics: Word and Image, “There is a synergy between words and pictures in comics such that their combined effect is greater than or different from what might have been predicted” (xiv). To read and interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style.

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Kim’s “Hurdles” is, some students claimed, a poem. In fact, the way the words are laid out on the page next to the pictures rather than in the usual speech balloons, the rhythm of the narrative, and even the repetition of the first and last sentences add to the poetic quality of this short piece. Other elements also come into play. The black-and-white artwork and the title “Hurdles” styled as hurdles on a race course add to the serious tone. The perspective is telling. The school boys are just running legs in one panel, and the protagonist is looking up to the coach in the third-to-last panel. The coach has great power over these adolescents.
The coach himself is just a pair of sunglasses on a nose, holding still, closed off. He is not portrayed as a fully human figure, and his ignorant racism is reflected in his stance. Of course, the hurdles as physical barriers also become the symbolic barrier of prejudice for the boy. Much more could be discovered and discussed in this piece; its effect is visceral, through the combination of words and pictures. As the American father of the graphic novel, Will Eisner, observes of the medium, “It is in every sense a singular form of reading” (5).

Some graphic novels, and the term includes all genres, are designed to inform and persuade. New media call for a “new rhetoric,” one that includes visual as well as verbal understanding and ability, as demonstrated in Visual Communication: A Writer’s Guide by Susan Hilligoss. This handbook, aimed at college students, acknowledges that new
technologies make the *visual* design of documents significant. Hilligoss summarizes as follows: "[C]ollege students . . . prepare their work with sophisticated computers and printers that rival the output of commercial printing. . . . They have access to a wealth of graphics via the Internet and inexpensive collections of clip art, as well as the means to create digital photographs and artwork. They make pages for the World Wide Web and effectively publish their work to a large audience. . . . In short, the world of college writing has changed" (1). Younger students likewise read and create arguments and do research in ways beyond simple print. The graphic novel offers an engaging medium for asking students to analyze information and persuasion in different ways.

For example, Joel Andreas’s *Addicted to War* is a graphic novel heavy on verbal text that is a manifesto aimed at American militarism. Well supported with statistics and references, *Addicted to War* combines
cartoon pictures with black-and-white photographs and covers its topic from the first chapter on Manifest Destiny through the Cold War and the “War on Terror” to the last chapter, “Resisting Militarism.” Addicted to War does not aim to give a neutral, textbook view but rather to persuade the reader that American militarism is wrong. The Korean War is mentioned on page 13 in two panels, one showing a cartoon General MacArthur boasting Today’s young people need the knowledge and skills to deal with persuasion in an age of images. and practices that promulgate inequity. Many graphic novels offer more diverse voices than traditional textbooks and can open up discussion about issues such as social justice. For example, The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904–1924 by Henry (Yoshitaka) Kiyama, translated into English by Frederik L. Schodt, portrays the struggles of four Japanese immigrants. Manga is the Japanese term for graphic novel, and the medium has a respected history in Japan. This narrative is both funny and disturbing as the four men work hard to become successful in their new home but suffer injustices and prejudices. Interestingly, Kiyama, as Schodt observes in the introduction, does not adhere to the American convention of the time of “drawing obsequious Japanese with slanted eyes and buckteeth (later with glasses and eventually cameras added)” (16). In its narrative and in its visuals, this graphic novel is a challenge to stereotypes and a new medium for examining such concepts.

Likewise, Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans challenges assumptions about the poor, victim blacks, who actually accomplished much while surviving slavery and racism (Laird and Laird); this book would work well to connect the English class to history. A graphic novel such as Dignifying Science: Stories about Women Scientists challenges the notion that scientific discoveries have been made by all or mostly males, making it a good book to connect to science classes (Ottaviani). The illustrations were all done by women artists. Graphic novels can not only be used for encouraging critical media literacy but also for encouraging cross-curriculum connections.

The work of one middle school teacher near Tulsa, Oklahoma, Carrie Edwards, illustrated the potential for graphic novels in celebrating diversity. Edwards brought in graphic novels as they supported her seventh-grade language arts course. For example, certain manga that are quite popular with middle school students include elements of Chinese mythology, such as warrior figures, which fit a unit on mythology. Even the form of the manga—which usually has to be read from back to front, from the American perspective—offered Edwards the opportunity to compare Japanese and American culture. Manga and other graphic novels
can also offer situations to which adolescents can relate, as in *Fruits Basket*, in which one girl is a “rice ball” and does not fit. Graphic novels present issues of difference and belonging, according to Edwards, and students enjoyed reading them, discussing them, researching them online, exploring animated versions of novels, and drawing characters and scenes from these books. The manga “open up so many things,” said Edwards, enabling the exploration of multiple literacies.

Using graphic novels in the classroom does present a challenge to teachers; a number of obstacles and concerns arise. First, anything new often faces resistance, especially if it is part of popular culture. Finding classroom-appropriate works is also a concern. Not all graphic novels are appropriate, and even some of the best contain profanity and sexual and violent content. Teachers will need to apprise their principals and parents of their plans and be able to offer a good rationale for using specific graphic novels in their courses. Censorship remains a problem around the country, and many educators, too, are loath to encounter any controversy in the classroom.

Second, graphic novels are not on the state or national tests. The alignment of curriculum and standardized testing is a growing problem, especially given the demands of legislation such as No Child Left Behind. Moreover, new literacies may not be widely accepted nor included in the district or school curriculum objectives. The current political climate is not particularly supportive of innovation. Even obtaining funding for graphic novels may be difficult.

Finally, teachers themselves will have to do their homework. Teachers must extend their ideas about and skills in multiple literacies; media literacy or critical literacy may not be familiar concepts. Fortunately, there are excellent works that can help teachers new to the field of graphic novels. For the beginning reader of the medium, Stephen Weiner’s *The 101 Best Graphic Novels* and Michele Gorman’s *Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens* offer many useful titles and helpful background information. Both Weiner and Gorman are library media specialists. Much information about various titles and where they can be obtained is also available online. Second, several titles offer excellent insights into the ways graphic novels work on readers: *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* by Scott McCloud (in graphic novel form), *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* by Robert C. Harvey, and works by Will Eisner. One can also find information online from librarians, publishers, and from teenagers themselves. In addition, new books are coming out, such as *Writing and Illustrating the Graphic Novel: Everything You Need to Know to Create Great Graphic Works* by Mike Chinn, that can help teachers and their students create graphic novels as well as read them. One of the advantages of graphic novels for the teacher is their freshness, and the teacher and students must work together to make meanings and to explore multiple literacies.

Graphic novels are increasing in number, quality, variety, and availability. They offer a new kind of text for the classroom and they demand new reading abilities. They tend to appeal to diverse students, including reluctant readers, and they offer both great stories and informational topics. For students who no longer deal with pure word texts in their daily lives, multiple literacies are a necessity. Schools must prepare young people to think critically with and about all kinds of texts.

**Works Cited**


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A former high school English and German teacher, Gretchen Schwarz now teaches curriculum studies at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include media literacy and graphic novels. *email: ges1004@okstate.edu*.