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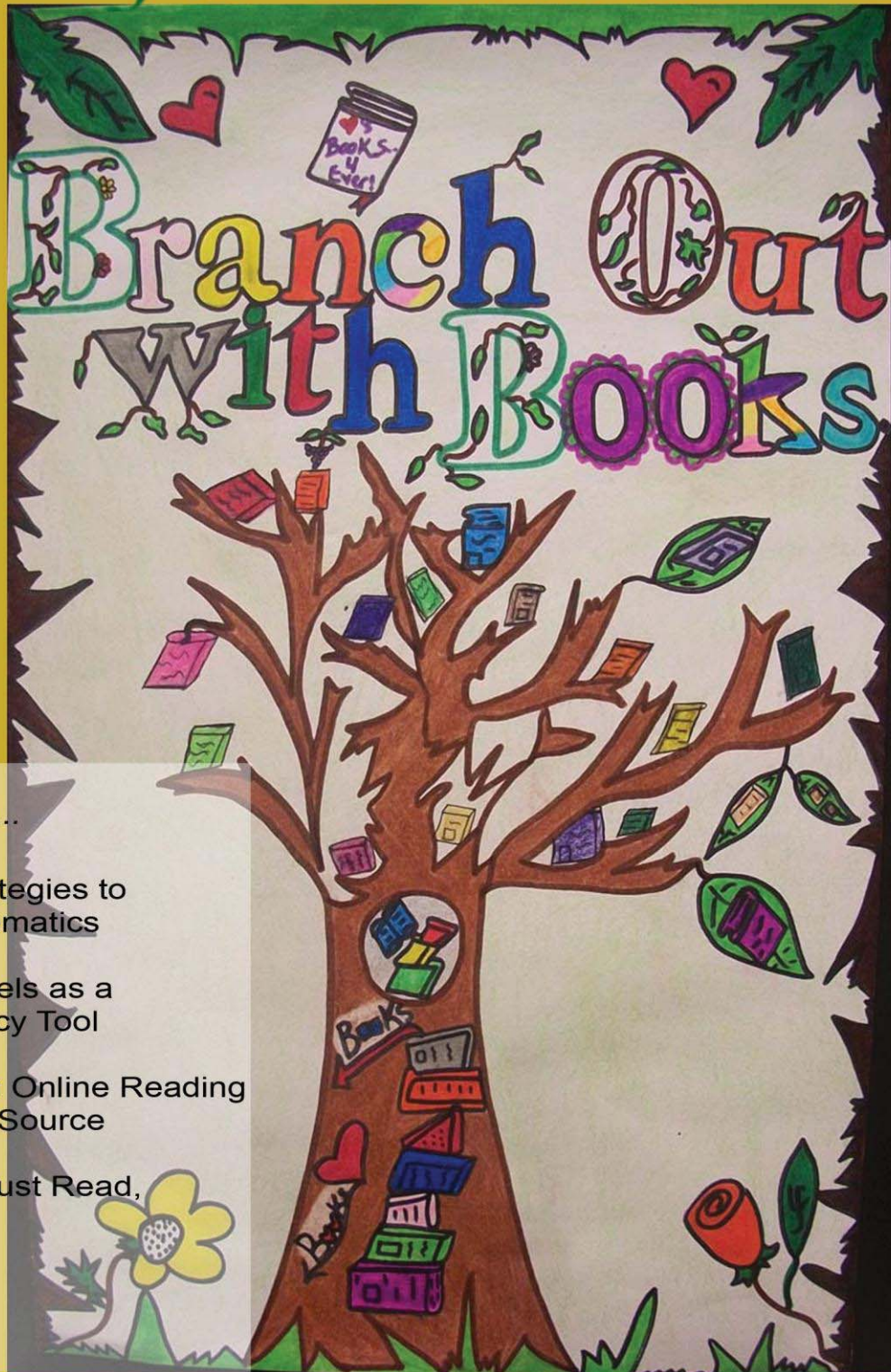Books

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Going Visual: Graphic Novels as Tools for Visual Literacy

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Abstract: Graphic novels are explored as valuable tools to promote visual literacy. Working definitions are provided, as it is difficult to pinpoint what constitutes "graphic novel" within equally vague terms of what constitutes "visual literacy." This can result in misconceptions and confusion about identifying graphic novels and their pedagogical value. An example of instruction using a graphic novel is offered, as well as limitations of using this medium in the classroom. A table of resources with suggested graphic novels in various genres for different grades is also incorporated.

A onetime undergraduate student recently invited me over to her house for a game night, where we shared our enthusiasm for graphic novels, to the other guests' amusement. We discussed how her passion for graphic novels, Japanese comics (*manga)* in particular, led her to expand her reading repertoire and fostered a love of writing as well.

It is not the first time that one of my students confesses a love of graphic novels that has led to other personal and educational ventures, such as writing for an online audience. It speaks volumes to some of the potential benefits of incorporating graphic novels in the classroom. As graphic novels' popularity continues to increase, a growing number of educators recognize and identify them as an engaging literacy resource in the classroom (Crawford, 2004). Imagine having students in your class who are so engaged with a text that once they are finished they want to continue making connections with the plot, characters, and themes. They might read related texts, draw, or write stories that continue or transform the original text.

Would incorporating graphic novels in the classroom work for all students in this way? This cannot be answered with any text brought into the classroom, but it presents a possibility; another way to reach out to students. Given the image dominant and visual literacy age we live in (Monnin, 2008), educators should consider all forms of literature, not to replace prose, but to provide students with the opportunity to explore other ways of meaning-making and foster deeper understandings of both (Frey & Fisher, 2010).

In this article I first provide a working definition of "graphic novel" in an attempt to de-mystify a format that encompasses any number of schools, artists, titles, styles, and trends. I then move on to explore the connection between graphic novels and visual literacy and provide ideas for how they can be incorporated into the curriculum.

Graphic novels: A definition

I encourage you to ask anyone to define the term "graphic novel." Chances are you will get various responses ranging from "comics" to "novels told with pictures" to "easy reading with images." There is no shortage of definitions and understandings and, with the overwhelming amount of titles published under the umbrella term of "graphic novel," there is a growing assumption that everyone knows what a graphic novel is and what it is not. In such murky waters, it is understandable that many educators are still concerned when it comes to pedagogical considerations of graphic novels (Carter, 2009), despite their increased use as instructional resources and rising interest even

in academic libraries (O'English et. al., 2006). Indeed, the Young Adult Library Services Association of the American Library Association has established a committee to choose the best graphic novels for teenagers per year, which helps lend this format "an aura of respectability" (Chelton, 2006, p.11).

Perhaps hesitance to embrace this format is due to a feeling that graphic novels are too risky (Carter, 2009), or due to a knee-jerk reaction to negative stereotypes usually associated with comic books and other media. De-mystifying the term first could foster and lead to further discussions of how graphic novels can be beneficial across the curriculum.

The term "graphic novel" has been around since the 1960s and is believed to have been first coined by Will Eisner as a marketing ploy to have his work published (O'English et. al., 2006). Since the purpose behind this term was to disassociate works from negative connotations juxtaposed with comics and other related media, "graphic novel" implies serious, mature, and parallel values to the traditional literary canon. While this term presumably helped Eisner's work get well-deserved recognition, if "graphic novels" is thought of as nothing but a term devised as a marketing ploy, then anything that is published and claims to be a graphic novel fits the bill, which could possibly heighten worries of taking dangerous risks when incorporating them in the classroom.

McCloud (1994) offers one possible definition for graphic novels that serves as a good starting point and steps away from marketing tactics: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to reproduce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p.9). This definition opens a lot of doors as to what counts as a graphic novel, as long as the images are juxtaposed in deliberate sequence and are written with precision, as is similarly done in prose (Frey & Fisher, 2010). The word "novel"

in the term "graphic novel" can serve to further narrow the definition, as it implies that, like many prose novels and series, they can be evaluated according to various characteristics. There is a beginning, middle, and end with well-developed plot and characters; where the work provides varied and audience-appropriate levels of conceptual difficulty which employ any number of literary devices at the author/artist's command. They span multiple genres, styles, and themes which can be analyzed and evaluated in terms of themes present, the use of forthright language, conceptual difficulty, readability, point of view, use of/lack of stereotypes, artistic choices, and others.

This can include works such as: comic books, *manga*, and picture books, but not comic strips, as those found in the Sunday newspaper. This definition should not be taken to imply that all graphic novels with a beginning, middle, and end can or should be used in the classroom, nor that the use of just one of these – picture books, for example, which are widely used in classrooms – is productively incorporating graphic novels in the classroom. Neither do I wish to imply that all graphic novels present quality works. Just as with any format, lower quality works always exist (Lyga & Lyga, 2004). Ultimately, it is up to the teacher to determine quality and classroom usability.

Graphic novels and visual literacy

We live in an era of "bain d'images," a bath of images (Avgerinou, 2009), where young people are immersed in a visual world thanks to advances such as television, computers, and the Internet (Sullivan, 2002). Part of what students now prefer includes obtaining information quickly and processing images (Jukes & Dosaj, 2006). They are engaged in practicing, fluidly navigating, and blurring the boundaries of school literacies and visual out-of-school literacies.

Engaging with visuals might sound simple, especially since our students do it every day. However, it is a complex process involving a series of visual competencies integrated with other ways of meaning-making (Debes, 1969). The viewer is learning to "read" visual messages by recognizing the basic "language" used in each media form, being able to judge the credibility and accuracy of the information presented, evaluating author's intent and meaning, and appreciating the techniques used to persuade and convey emotion (Scheibe, 2004). The viewer uses these competencies to think, learn, and express meaning using images (Braden & Hortin, 1982). It goes beyond the simple "this is what is happening in the picture" to a more thorough understanding that visual images are created and used purposefully and present different points of view, not an absolute version of reality.

Incorporating graphic novels in the curriculum makes it possible to not only motivate students to read (Carter, 2009; Monnin, 2008), but they can also be a valuable tool for teaching visual literacy (Snowball, 2006); an important 21st century skill. The combination of image and text categorize graphic novels as multimodal texts where meaning is conveyed at different levels (Allen & Ingulsrud, 2005), which emphasizes the needed ability to deal with multiple layers of meaning.

Readers, for example, must become familiar with character features, as different drawing styles consistently reveal subtle personality traits in various ways. One illustration of this is the use of eyes in graphic novels. In some styles, exaggeratedly large and round eyes on a character can represent innocence and naïveté. Large eyes can represent a heroic character who strives to do

the right thing, while characters with narrow eyes can be evil or unpredictable. Subtle variations of this can be harder to pick up for beginners, such as the change in one character's eyes from one panel to another to reveal fatal flaws or emotions. Due to variances, it becomes important to explore different styles on the path to becoming a successful reader of visuals like graphic novels.

Once the reader becomes familiar and comfortable with the visual demands of the text, any speech bubbles that might be present add another layer of meaning which is paired with the visual context. Some readers might look at the images first, making their own meaning from the visual clues, before actually reading the printed text (assuming there is text present, as this is not always the case). This could help them better understand and benefit from the experience of reading graphic novels. In a way, readers need to become visually literate detectives, where they "detect, decode, and synthesize the information from the visual image as if within lies the solution to the puzzle" (Way, 2006, p. 38). Practicing such decoding with graphic novels can be very enjoyable and aid in literacy gains, as "visual input has the ability to capture attention, and that attention is a prerequisite to learning" (Zambo & Brozo, 2008, p.31). Any increased motivation to read could also lead to the search and discovery of other texts (Snowball, 2006; Weiner, 2003).

Graphic novels in the classroom

While several scholars emphasize the use of graphic novels and other visual texts, particularly for reluctant readers (Monnin, 2008; Krashen, 2005; Wilhelm & Smith 2005) or readers less proficient in English (Cary, 2004), the possibilities afforded by graphic novels can benefit all students (Carter, 2009). Graphic novels present a number of diverse topics, where the plots are rich and include positive values like courage, confidence, pride, and family. Different genres include, but are not limited to: autobiography, biography,

science fiction, fantasy, comedy, mystery, horror, sports, realistic fiction, and historical fiction. You can find any number of graphic novels that appeal to any audience. Determining if they are usable and appropriate for your classroom works in much the same way you would choose a prose novel. But, how can graphic novels be used in the curriculum? What graphic novels are currently available that could be used in the classroom? In the next paragraphs I attempt to answer these questions by providing an example of a graphic novel I used as part of a high school Language Arts class.

The works of William Shakespeare are mostly still a staple of high school life. Many students expect it and some might even dread the time they will read these classics. Previous experience persuaded me to look for other ways to approach the text to encourage all of my students to engage with Shakespeare's work. Recent graphic novel adaptations of his works caught my attention. After exploring some of the existing graphic novel editions, I decided to use *Romeo and Juliet: The Manga Edition* (2008) by Adam Sexton and Yali Lin, published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. I chose this particular text because it contains no gratuitous violence or nudity and the text is mostly faithful to the original. The pages are not overly cluttered with images, but are still detailed. I usually use graphic novels that are not too cluttered when I first introduce them in a class (see Appendix A) because it has been helpful for the students getting acquainted with this medium. If there is an overabundance of detail or little white space, some students may feel overwhelmed.

In addition to the discussion of the play based on the text, using this graphic novel offered the opportunity to explore the syntax and semantics of the visuals. Syntax includes the form or building blocks of an image, while semantics refers more broadly with how images relate to issues in the world; both of which are necessary to being visually literate (Bamford,

2003). Let's look at an example of how to address these areas.

Take a close look at Figure 1 from the graphic novel of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is a scene toward the end of Act I, where Romeo and Juliet have just kissed and are interrupted by Juliet's nurse. You can choose whether you would like to begin the discussion with syntax, semantics, or a little of both. I usually integrate both into the discussion, but for clarity I have included two lists of possible questions pertaining to this one page from the book. These are only some possibilities.
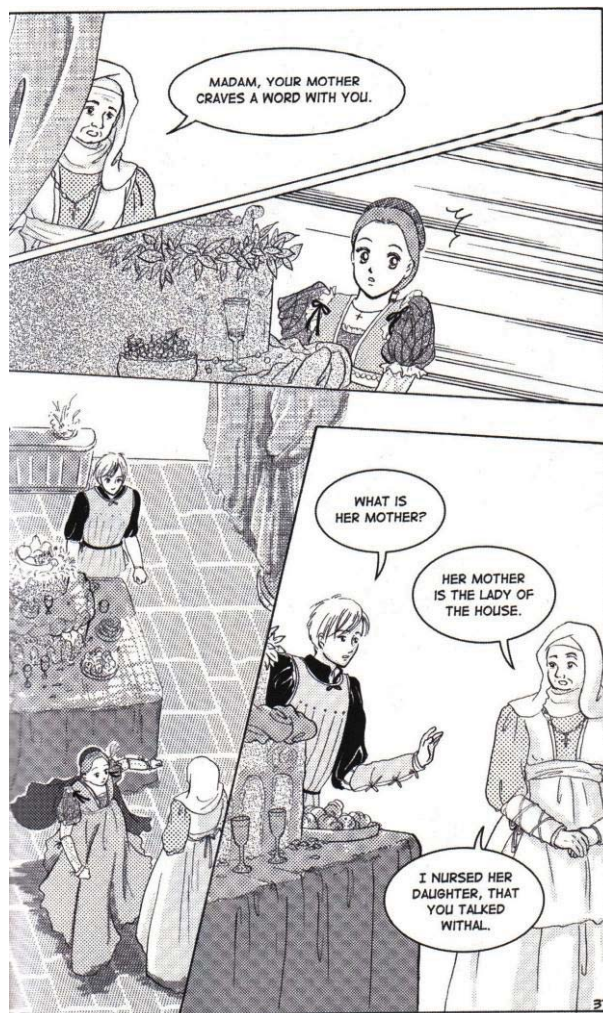

Figure 1. Source: Shakespeare, W. & Sexton, A. (2008). *Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: The manga edition*. (Y. Lin, Illus.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., p. 37.

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Possible syntax questions:
- In the first panel, why do you think the illustrator chose not to include any background detail except for a hint of fabric? What could be the purpose of the white space?
- In the second panel, how are lines used to indicate emotion? What emotion is conveyed? Do these lines provide any other information?
- The third panel includes background details and movement, but no text bubble, and the angle allows the reader to view into the room, as if from above. How do these choices in presentation affect the mood in this panel? What possible meaning/s can we infer from these choices?
- Look at the characters' positioning in the last panel. Romeo's hand is outstretched and he is leaning forward, while the nurse's hands are clasped and she seems to be leaning back. What does the positioning of these characters tell us about their relationship?

Possible semantics questions:
- Look at the clothes and accessories of the characters. What do they tell us about the historical context in which the events take place?
- What differences or similarities does this scene depict of teen romance in Shakespeare's time as compared to current experiences?
- Who is the intended audience of these images?
- If comparing this scene with the original text: What has been changed, left out, or included in the scene/s in comparison to the original text?

Once you are comfortable using this medium in the classroom, there are many more

possibilities for in-depth discussions of how the visuals and text work together to foster deeper meaning-making. At the end of this article is a table with a list of recommended titles you can use to get ideas to begin (or continue) integrating graphic novels in the curriculum. I included titles for elementary, middle, and high school, but categorizing them in this way should not impede their use at any grade level, as long as you, the teacher, read them carefully before making a decision to use them.

Caveats

Though this paper emphasizes the use of graphic novels in the curriculum as a valuable tool to address visual literacy, there are some caveats to consider:

- Not all libraries are well stocked with current graphic novel titles (except for picture books, which are a staple of most, if not all, libraries and media centers). Communicate with local libraries and school media centers and ask for titles so that students have access to a diversity of graphic novels.
- Many graphic novels are serialized in a large number of volumes. Though I encourage readers to pick up serialized titles, a graphic novel that has thirty or more volumes will probably intimidate even the most visually motivated. Carefully consider which serialized titles could be most beneficial and motivating.
- Some graphic novels do have problematic topics and/or scenes. It is important to read them carefully before bringing them to the classroom.

Graphic novels: Building bridges

This article provided a working definition for graphic novels, examined their connection to visual literacy, and explored some ways a graphic novel could be used in the classroom. Appendix A provides a list of possible resources for consideration in the curriculum.

While teachers must explore the pros and cons carefully before introducing new texts in the classroom, they must also consider and be aware of what captures their students' attention and motivates their learning. Many students are comfortable with visuals like graphic novels (Schwarz, 2002) and incorporating them in the curriculum can be a valuable way to address visual literacy in the 21st century.

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