Graphic Novels: A Bridge Between Print and Media for ELL Teaching

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Abstract

Graphic novels have become one of the fastest growing print media in recent years. The popularity has early roots in Japan with the Manga series. Comic books, a precursor to graphic novels have been traced back to the late 1920s and 30s in Europe with The Adventures of Tintin and superheroes in the USA with Superman and even earlier in Japan with Manga. In the past twenty years binding a series of comic books in the USA publishing world has brought on the insurgence of graphic novels. While there are two target audiences, adults and adolescents, more recently the popularity and demand of graphic novels has encouraged publishers to venture into graphic novels for primary grade students and across other genres of literature.

This paper will share findings from two studies using graphic novels as a teaching tool in the classroom including a study conducted with primary grade students being introduced to graphic novels for the first time (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2014). Evidence from the second study shows graphic novels had the highest check out rate out of all books in their library (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2012).

Graphic novels can be used at the university level to introduce future educators on using graphic novels as a tool to explore multi-literacies. Graphic novels help develop critical literacies for English-language learners (ELL) at all levels. Moreover, graphic novels can work as a visual support for promoting understanding of content and reinforcement of language use (Gottlieb, 2004). They may be use to validate text, and provide comprehensible input for processing language, provide multiple ways of accessing content, create meaning and to communicate ideas. This presentation will include recommended graphic novels for primary school-aged children, graphic novels across genres, and websites.

Introduction

The evolution of comics began in the early 20th century, however, it was in 1978 that the term "graphic novel" was coined by Will Eisner with his bound set of adult comics, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories.* Despite the longevity of comic books and now graphic novels there has been reluctance on the part of teachers, librarians, parents, and lawmakers in general about their value as appropriate and challenging reading materials (Son, Chase & Steiner, 2011; Thompson, 2007; Weiner, 2012). One survey study of 60 elementary teachers taking part in an institute found the greater majority were unfamiliar with graphic novels, but also recognized that graphic novels would make useful teaching tools in their classrooms (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher & Frey, 2011).

In the past twenty years, binding a series of comic books in the USA publishing world has brought on the insurgence of graphic novels. The first bound series of comics for children took place in the United States in 1981, published through Warp Graphics, with a marketable graphic novel *Elfquest* by Windi Pini. It was not until 1984 however, that this book began gaining acceptance and appearing in libraries (Weiner, 2012). Nearly ten years later, *Sandman* by Neil Gaiman and *Bone* by Jeff Smith, hit the market and both were huge successes opening the doors for more cartoonists to enter the world of the rapidly rising graphic novel popularity. Syndicated cartoonists [i.e. Charles Schulz (*Peanuts*); Jim Davis (*Garfield*)] bound their comic strips into books and sale numbers showed additional proof that bound cartoon series and stories into graphic novels had a future. In 2002, the movie box office success of *Spider-man* led to even more awareness toward comics and graphic novels. The combined story and illustration format of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney added more evidence of popularity for cartooning in a book. By 2010 most large publishers of children's books had a graphic novel line (Weiner, 2012).

While there have been two target audiences, adults and adolescents, more recently the popularity and demand of graphic novels has encouraged a few publishers to venture into graphic novels for primary grade students. There also was a move to create graphic formatted books across other genres of literature. Now graphic novel content spans from fantasy and classic literature remakes to science and history. In 2008, Françoise Mouly and her husband, Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novelist Art

Spiegelman, brought a new vision for graphic novels. The popularity among middle grade children was evident, so why not create graphic formatted books for an even younger audience? Thus, the founding of Toon Books was launched in 2008 with an audience of primary children in mind (Brenner, 2010). Needless to say, these delightful books are a success and have garnered numerous awards for the illustrator from the Eisner to the Theodore Seuss Geisel Awards (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2014). Graphic novels for primary grade students were of particular interest to a group of researchers who are part of this paper presentation.

Using graphic novels as a teaching tool

In this paper, findings from two studies are shared using graphic novels as a teaching tool in the classroom. The first study was conducted with primary grade students, who were introduced to graphic novels for the first time (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2014). Evidence from the second publication showed graphic novels had the highest check out rate out of all books in the city public library (Son, Chase & Steiner, 2011). Additional studies have found graphic novels are successful teaching tools with elementary students (Gandy, 2010; Karp, 2010; Kuhlman & Danielson, 2010; Lyga, 2006; Monnin, 2011; Olshansky, 2008; Teale, Kim, & Boerman-Cornell, 2008; Thompson, 2008). There have also been several studies with secondary students (Dallacqua, 2012; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Gorman, 2003; Schwarz, 2006; Smetana, Odelson, Burns & Grisham, 2009). Using graphic novels with ELL students has also shown promising results (Chun, 2009; Monnin, 2010; Ranker, 2007).

The first study by Chase, Son & Steiner (2014) took place in a public charter elementary school with a group of first and second grade students. The students' abilities ranged from non-readers to confident readers. Both boys and girls participated. Over the span of six weeks, three university faculty members, one graduate student, and a volunteer cartoonist spent every Wednesday afternoon with the children in large and small group settings. Prior to the work, we conducted a baseline questionnaire with the students to establish their familiarity with comics/graphic novels. Students were asked about graphic novels prior to sharing examples with them. In this same interview we also assessed the students' ability to sequence a comic strip. We downloaded a wordless cartoon for children from the internet and proceeded to cut the cartoon into individual frames. We then asked the students to put the frames back together in the way they understood the flow of action through the illustrations. Our initial survey results helped determine what literacy skills we might teach the children. We decided the students would benefit from introducing them to several characteristics associated with graphic novels through a series of mini-lessons. We developed a series of six lessons around sequencing including: teaching graphic novel features; putting cartoon frames in the right order; creating words that conveyed dialogue, sound effects or transitions; filling in the speech and thought bubbles in a comic strip; retelling the story using a boxed panel format; and transferring personal understanding through creating their own illustrated graphic story. Students were taught the mini-lessons in a small group format within a scheduled two and one-half hour window of time over the six weeks. One of the student workstations created included a library with over 60 different primary graphic novels (PGNs) for the children to choose from and read independently or with a partner (list included in the study).

Findings and recommendations

We found students and their teachers were unfamiliar with primary graphic novels. In our interview two students who had older siblings had expressed they knew what graphic novels were because their siblings read them. The majority, including the teacher had not been exposed to PGNs. Students were delighted to work with the adults, but the star of the lessons was the volunteer cartoonist who brought in some of his work and organized a process for them to create their own graphic story. They created their stories with a comic strip format which proved to be challenging in the short amount of time. First, this experiment occurred within the first semester of school and the students had not been formally introduced to processes used for writing a complete story. Second, meeting students once a week over a six-week span certainly had an impact on continuity and follow through. The students did grasp the concept of sequencing as evidenced by their final story creations (Chase, Son & Steiner, 2014). They also were very familiar with primary graphic novels with the abundance of examples we shared. We cannot emphasize enough how enthusiastic the children were about reading the books on their own. It also was evident to the university faculty that additional story elements could and were taught as we worked with the variety of PGNs. Our emerging readers welcomed the additional picture clues that served as a useful strategy for

decoding the speech bubbles. We were also delighted that we could find PGNs across various genres including science and math. Since the original study was conducted the number of PGNs has continued to rise in production. We have been encouraging undergraduate and graduate students to use them in their teaching. The greater majority of librarians are on board with acquiring a graphic novel collection for their libraries as evidence of their popularity proved surprising (Son, Chase & Steiner, 2011).

Conclusions and additional possibilities

Graphic novels can be used at the university level to introduce future educators on using graphic novels as a tool to explore multiple literacies. Graphic novels help develop critical literacies for English-language learners (ELL) at all levels (Boatright, 2010). Moreover, graphic novels can work as a visual support for promoting understanding of content and reinforcement of language use (Gottlieb, 2004). They also may be used to validate text, and provide comprehensible input for processing language, provide multiple ways of accessing content, create meaning and to communicate ideas (Bucher & Manning, 2004; McGill-Franzen & Botzakis, 2009). This paper includes recommended graphic novels for primary school-aged children, graphic novels across genres, and websites.

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Useful websites

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http://graphicnovelstudy.wikispaces.com
www.classicalcomics.com/links.html
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