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A Graphic Novel Project for Identifying Scholarly Journals and Supporting Classroom Instruction of Informational Text



by Nancy Gibney and Sue Homant



Abstract

This article describes how university students in a teacher education course worked together to create a graphic novel to teach information literacy. The purpose of the Graphic Novel Project was to have the students experience the benefit of constructing a graphic novel so that they could use a similar approach when teaching in their classrooms. Student feedback showed they had gained an increased awareness of the graphic novel as a legitimate informational and instructional text form for teaching content by adapting informational text into a sequential art narrative.

Keywords: graphic novels, instructional tool, informational text



This article describes how university students taking a secondary content reading methods course, worked together to produce a nonfiction graphic novel. The graphic novel was designed to teach information literacy. This innovative project was based on adapting an online tutorial explaining the differences between popular magazines and scholarly journals into a graphic novel format to convey complex ideas in an interesting, entertaining, and engaging way.

The Graphic Novel as an Educational Tool

According to researchers (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Frey & Fischer, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002), comics and graphic novels can be powerful teaching tools. Reading and making



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comic and graphic novels can encourage students to become more skilled at critically consuming and creating texts that examine complex concepts. Yang (2006), author of *American Born Chinese*, explained that comics are multimedia texts, meaning that they are a single medium made up of two distinct media forms: still images and text. When students learn to read comics, and especially when they learn to create comics, they are learning the 21st century skill of making decisions about information and media (Standen, 2010). Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat (2002) pointed out that:

Constructing a comic book requires students to determine what is most important in their readings, to rephrase it succinctly, and then to organize it logically. During the process of comic book design, students select and gather relevant information. They examine and then present this information in a visual manner that both informs and entertains. Thus, students are engaged in cross-curricular activities embracing the language arts, visual arts and content areas (p.759).

Graphic novels can also be used to supplement textbooks and provide learners with the support they need to comprehend course content. As Gavigan and Tomasevich (2011) believed, students may become more willing to engage in reading across the curriculum when librarians and teachers allow them to use nontraditional texts, such as graphic novels. Other educators and theorists also believed that graphic novels can make curriculum more relevant to students (Alvermann & Xu, 2003; Schwarz, 2002; Xu, Sawyer, & Zunich, 2005). Several studies have shown that graphic novels can motivate K-12 students to achieve reading enjoyment and success (Botzakis, 2009; Carter, 2007, Hammond, 2009; Monnin, 2008).

Implementation of the Graphic Novel Project

I (Nancy) decided to try using a graphic novel for instructional purposes in a Secondary Reading Methods course I was teaching. I thought that students would best come to understand the benefits of graphic novels if they had the experience of creating one that dealt with a complex concept.

In the last decade, a major paradigm shift in academic librarianship has been to emphasize the use of scholarly articles in student research papers. Students in teacher education, as in most academic programs, must learn differences between scholarly journal articles and popular magazine articles when conducting research. Faculty have become concerned that their students have not mastered the ability to differentiate between popular and scholarly articles. Therefore, a decision was made that the students would create a graphic novel distinguishing differences between using articles from scholarly journals and popular magazines. The research librarian also came to the class to teach research skills, specifically focusing on how to find scholarly articles about graphic novels. She also showed the Library's ReSearchQuest tutorial video, "Scholarly Journals vs. Popular Magazines." The students would later transform this tutorial into a creative graphic novel.

I had two main purposes for this project: (1) helping students learn about the differences between scholarly and popular articles by creating a graphic novel depicting these differences; (2) helping teacher education students learn about a new text genre that has potential for supporting their own future students' engagement/motivation and learning of content. To add a more real-world dimension to the class project, the eventual graphic novel would be used in addition to the university library's online tutorial on this topic. Two added benefits of the graphic novel publication would be: (a) students in the class could declare that they were published authors, and (b) other university students reading the graphic novel might have an easier time grasping the concepts in the tutorial.

Before introducing the graphic novel project, I asked students in my Secondary Reading Methods course what they knew about graphic novels. Only one of the seven students showed any real familiarity with the graphic novel genre. Therefore, the class was introduced to Griffith's (2010) definition of graphic novels: "Graphic novels include elements of both print and visual in the creation of characters that move through the narrative with sequential art panels that show the action and characterization and help establish the mood and tone" (p. 183). I felt this was the most appropriate definition to use for the purpose of this particular graphic novel project.

To demonstrate how sequential art could be used to effectively teach difficult subject matter (e.g., math and history), several graphic novels, including Gonick and Smith's (1993) *The Cartoon Guide to Statistics*, and Hennessey's (2008) *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation*, were showcased in a classroom discussion.

Additionally, Ayers and Alexander-Tanner's (2010) *To TEACH – The Journey in Comics*, a book written in graphic novel format, was required reading. This book demonstrated how an educational graphic novel could be fun, humorous,

and realistic, while addressing classroom challenges and successes teachers encounter every day. After developing an appreciation for how graphic novels can effectively communicate complex ideas through blending facts and information with creative storytelling (Monnin, 2010), students were taught about the unique individual elements that comprise graphic novels, including speech bubbles, panels, gutters, and captions. They were also taught about the important role each element plays.

Next, students applied what they had learned. I gave them a blank sheet of paper with panels and speech bubbles and asked them to create a comic strip. They readily came up with creative story lines, but struggled drawing the pictures.

The Collaborative Process Begins

Together, the students began brainstorming topics, plots, themes, and characters for possible storylines they thought other undergraduate students at our university would be interested in reading. Many ideas relating to the current pop culture were bandied about, such as using music, fashion, videos, movies, vampires, avatars, and even humor, to engage their audience. Students eventually agreed that the storyline should revolve around an adventure theme with a personal touch, including familiar scenes from our campus. They began to write a rough draft of their ideas to be shared via a storyboard.

During the following class session, students reviewed each other's storyboard drafts. One student's storyline was based on the popular Indiana Jones movies. The plot entailed an Indiana Jones-like character going to find the shield of Tommy Titan, the university's mascot. "Indiana" was shown planning his journey using information gleaned from a scholarly article that a research librarian had found for him. Everyone loved the idea; therefore, it was agreed that the class would build upon it. They decided the title of their

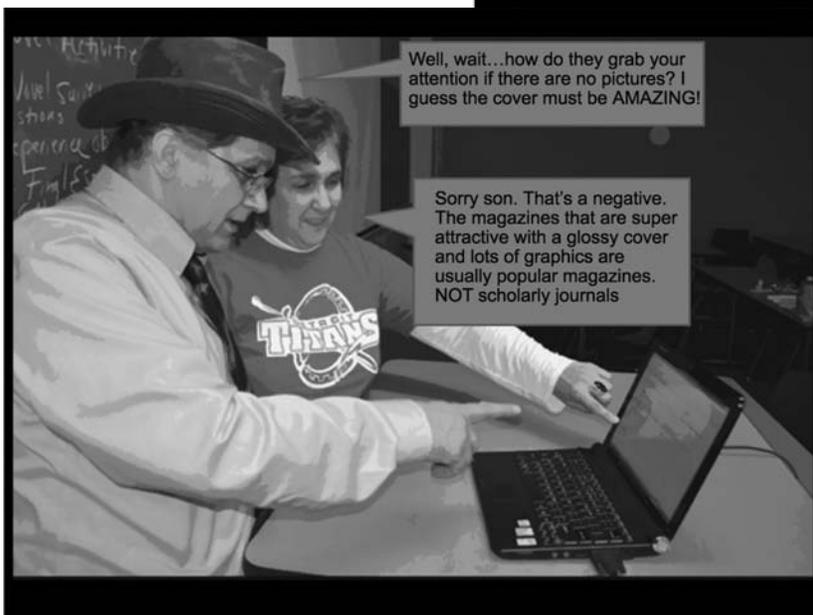
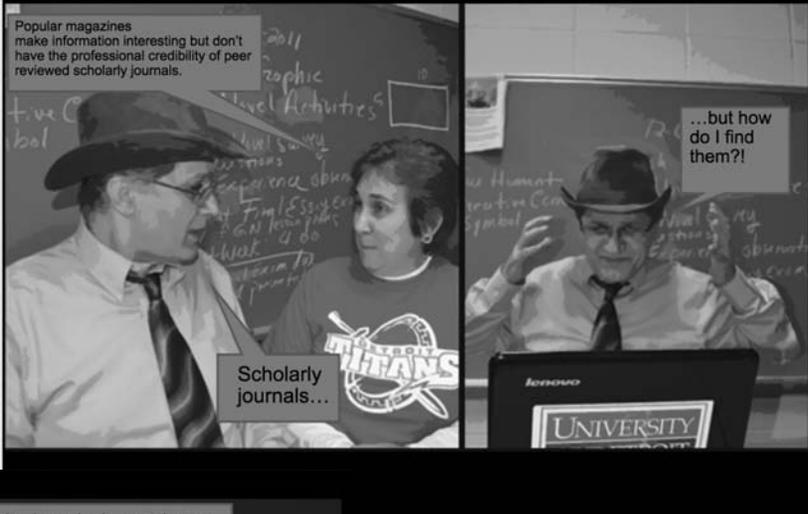
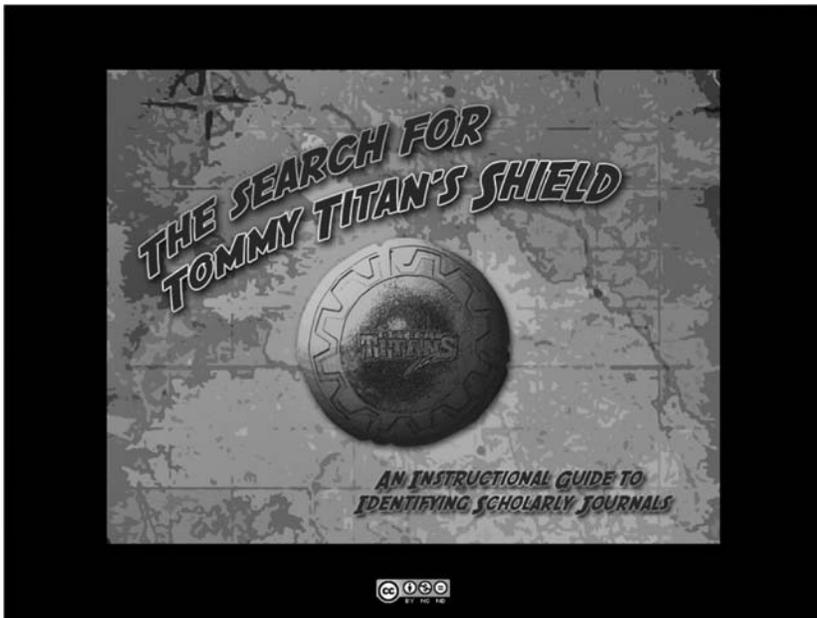
graphic novel would be *The search for Tommy Titan's shield: An instructional guide to identifying scholarly journals*.

When the discussion turned to who would create the illustrations for the graphic novel, no one volunteered. Everyone claimed to be terrified of drawing. At this point, the major concern was that this lack of drawing ability would be the demise of the graphic novel project; without pictures there would be no graphic novel. Fortunately, the librarian pointed out that photos taken from a camera could be converted into digital cartoons, using Adobe Photoshop. Luckily, one student had experience with the software and gladly accepted this challenge. A collective sigh of relief could be heard from his fellow classmates. To help my students gain additional information about graphic novels, I decided to invite renowned graphic novel author and illustrator, Mark Crilley, to speak on campus to the class and to others interested in learning "how-to tips" for writing and illustrating graphic novels.

During his presentation, one of my students asked, "What ideas do you have for people who feel they have no drawing ability?" Crilley suggested the following:

- Look at drawings found in well-known graphic novels, such as *Diary of Wimpy Kid* (Kinney, 2007), where stick figures and shapes are used very effectively to convey information.
- Read *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1994) to develop an understanding of visual literacy and of the use of graphic novel elements.
- View YouTube videos that demonstrate how to illustrate graphic novels for people of all ages and different skill levels.
- Use technology tools such as clip art, comic making software sites, Adobe Photoshop, and Google to obtain images.

Voices from MI - A Graphic Novel Project for Identifying Scholarly Journals and Supporting Classroom Instruction of Informational Text



Throughout his presentation, Crilley emphasized that first and foremost “it’s all about the writing” when creating graphic novels, and that the development of the story is as important as the images used. He demonstrated this point by modeling the process he uses when going from script to panel to get ideas for establishing the plot and conflict for his graphic novels. He suggested that teachers could adapt and use this technique with their students. Crilley set the scene by writing the following on chart paper:

Panel 1: Establishing Shot [Two guys walking through steep snowy mountains, speech bubbles emerging from their mouths.]

Panel 2: The first guy says, “We’ve gotta get there before sundown.”

Panel 3: The second guy asks, “What if we don’t?”

Panel 4: The first guy replies, “Simple, if we don’t make it in time, we die!”

Crilley stressed to the audience that the script is the single most important component of a comic strip/graphic novel. Before the panels can be illustrated, there must be a story to illustrate.

While watching Crilley draw, a third grade boy in the audience began to write and illustrate his own “desert adventure” using Crilley’s story as a model to write his own. His story was about a little boy lost in the desert and how he overcame the challenges that he faced to stay alive. Similar to Crilley’s example, the story contained a plot, conflict, dialogue, and the elements of a graphic novel; panels, gutters, captions, and speech balloons. He demonstrated that he understood the story structure and the special features that make graphic novels different from other types of texts.

After Crilley’s presentation, my students were asked to provide written feedback regarding the most important points they had learned from him. Included below is a sampling of their responses:

- “The best part of his talk was when he said you need a story to make it all happen. You need a beginning, middle, and an end to really bring a graphic novel to life.”
- “Before Mark Crilley’s presentation I had no idea that comic book creation was such a long process. I thought comic book creation was just drawing and speech bubbles. The amount of redrawing/revision was surprising. I also didn’t know that computer tools such as Photoshop could be used.”
- “Mark Crilley told us that you don’t have to be an amazing artist to make great graphic novels. There are many comic strips and graphic novels out there that consist solely of stick figures or simple line drawings.”

After listening to Crilley’s presentation, the students felt better prepared and more excited than ever to begin writing their graphic novel. First, they generated a list of the duties necessary for completing the project, including:

- writing the script,
- creating dialog for the speech bubbles,
- taking pictures of scenes to use in the graphic novel,
- using Adobe Photoshop to convert photos into digital comics,
- writing the introduction and acknowledgements,
- selecting a discussion facilitator and note taker,
- editing and revising the written scripts.

Based on their learning styles and preferences, each student then selected the tasks he or she wanted to complete to contribute to the graphic novel project. In addition, the library’s instructional designer volunteered to revise the final slides, with the research librarian agreeing to address any questions students might have regarding copyright issues and accuracy of the graphic novel’s content. Students

Throughout his presentation, Crilley emphasized that first and foremost “it’s all about the writing” when creating graphic novels, and that the development of the story is as important as the images used. He demonstrated this point by modeling the process he uses when going from script to panel to get ideas for establishing the plot and conflict for his graphic novels. He suggested that teachers could adapt and use this technique with their students. Crilley set the scene by writing the following on chart paper:

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also were given guidelines to follow when creating the graphic novel. Because students had determined the plot, the conflict, and the characters they would include in the graphic novel previously, they now needed to make other important decisions. For example:

- Determine the numbers of pages and panels needed for the beginning, middle and final scenes of the graphic novel.
- Determine the mechanism for taking the factual information from the tutorial unit and transferring it into a humorous story with different types of speech balloons.

After making and implementing these decisions, students finished designing their graphic novel. At the conclusion of the course, they were asked to reflect and share their thoughts on the following question: “As a result of learning about informational graphic novels and creating one with your fellow classmates, do you think you will use them when you teach, and how?” The following is a sample of their comments:

- Yes, I would. I find that students do well when something of the student’s interest such as graphic novels can be incorporated into learning their subject matter. Students will read graphic novels because of the pictures they provide. Since my area is mathematics, I would have the students create characters to look like numbers to explain a concept of solving mathematical problems, or create music heroes that the students listen to that explain the importance of solving math problems. (Math major)
- I do believe I would use graphic novels in the future when teaching. Graphic novels really engage the reader and appeal to students of varying ability levels including struggling readers and ESL students. I most definitely can use graphic novels in my social studies class. I may perhaps ask

my students to create a graphic novel to explain a lesson on importing and exporting goods as I did in my lesson plan for the class. (Social Studies major)

- I think I will try to incorporate graphic novels into my classroom when I teach. When I began this class and was first presented with the idea of graphic novels for education, I was skeptical but have since come to see how a graphic novel could be used to teach any subject in a more exciting and interesting way. I plan to teach science classes and think that a lesson which asked students to present a topic learned in class graphically could be very successful. (Science major)

Feedback from students indicated that they had gained an increased awareness of the graphic novel as a legitimate informational and instructional text form for teaching content.

Pedagogical Principles and Implications for Teaching

Using the pedagogical principles discussed in this article could help teachers make informed instructional decisions when using graphic novels in their classrooms. Teachers need to be cognizant of the following when engaging students in creating graphic novels and changing the way text information is presented:

- Writers must consider their audiences, appropriateness and purpose of the content, copyright issues, and features of the text (e.g., speech bubbles panels, gutters).
- Writers need models of text they are composing, and they need models of how to think through choices they face when composing particular types of texts.
- Composing texts is more about shaping and understanding the content in the text than it is about the form of the text.

The authors hope that the readers of this article will consider using graphic novels in their classroom instruction as an innovative way to teach information to their diverse learners. We also believe encouraging students to create their own graphic novels to demonstrate information learned will assist them in better understanding new ideas and concepts.

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