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METHODS

Reframing the Graphic Novel for In-service Teachers: Reading, Writing, and Creating Comics

JOELLEN MAPLES

As a former middle school teacher and current teacher educator in a literacy program, I know all too well the value of the graphic novel as a life line for secondary students who struggle with reading. In my young adult literature course, where I teach critical literacy to in-service teachers, I rely on comics that contain text such as *Refresh*, *American Born Chinese*, *AD: After the Deluge*, *Maus*, and *Persopolis*. However, in my course on how to teach reading to struggling readers, I use Sara Varon's wordless graphic novel, *Robot Dreams*. The graduate students in this course are in-service teachers with limited experience with graphic novels. When we discuss ways to help students who struggle with comprehension, I suggest the use of *Robot Dreams* as a tool for all grade levels and as a text that teachers can use specifically with struggling readers because it is a wordless graphic novel.

When my graduate students first open up *Robot Dreams*, they are surprised that it is a graphic novel and that it is wordless. I still find it unsettling when my graduate students reveal that they have not read a graphic novel prior to taking my class, even though they see their own students reading them. While graphic novels are becoming more popular with teens, teachers still seem hesitant to bring them into their classrooms, unless they are using *Maus* or *Persopolis*. This article explores the rationale I use with my graduate students to encourage them to consider the use of graphic novels in their own classrooms; it also explains the methods I employ for using *Robot Dreams* in my course. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion of integrating comics into writing instruction with such online tools such as NCTE's Read, Write, and Think Comic Creator, Bitstrips, and Comic Life 2.

Before I try to persuade my graduate students to consider using the graphic novel in their classrooms, I begin with a general discussion about what it means to be a reader and the various genres readers enjoy. This discussion is crucial because I find that my students consider the concept of

"reading" to be a very narrow act. For them, the act of reading is based on traditional print texts. To counter these limited views of reading, I ask my students to consider what people read every day and how modern technology makes the act of reading very different from reading only print texts. Some new reading genres include email, websites, Twitter, Facebook, text messages, video games, and images. I even go so far as to say that a basketball coach can "read" a defense. I deconstruct their views of reading so they may begin the crucial task of reconstructing their own definition.

As Jenkins (2006) points out, print-text literacies are no longer the dominant literacy; therefore, teachers should accommodate image-text literacies, as in the graphic novel. This type of reading based on image-text literacies is a semiotic process. Siegel (2006) explains "Semiotics is uniquely suited to understanding multimodality because it offers a way of thinking about meaning and text that does not privilege language over all other sign systems" (p. 68). In this regard, the multimodal nature of the graphic novel and the idea of reading signs, gestures, and pictures presents a different way to think about reading and privileging print. Therefore, the language of graphic novels is based on signs. As Eisner (1985) states, "Comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language" (p. 8).

When I talk with my graduate students about struggling readers, I explain the many benefits of using graphic novels with such readers. Frey and Fisher (2004) found that graphic novels enhanced multiple literacies of struggling readers and provided age appropriate themes within lower-level texts. This issue is important, as it is often difficult to find texts that are mature in content and are the correct readability for students. Since graphic novels feature images and use words only for dialogue and narration, students find the genre less intimidating than a traditional linear print text. And because struggling readers often have problems visualizing what they read, the graphic novel can serve as a tool for helping the

reader comprehend the story through the act of visualization. It is the combination of words and pictures that actually enhances the reading experience. As Weiner (2004) points out about this marriage of text and pictures,

A well-done graphic novel offers the immediacy of the prose reading experience, with the pictures and the words working simultaneously, making a graphic novel not only something one reads but something one sees as well, like reading and watching a movie at the same time. (p. 115)

In graphic novels, the visuals drive the story forward and enrich it in ways that words alone cannot. For that reason, graphic novels can be used with advanced readers as well; they can help students develop their critical thinking by fostering the incorporation of complex, multiple literacy skills (Jacobs, 2007). Perhaps the best description of the value of graphic novels in terms of what they can offer students in the classroom is expressed by Weiner (2004) when he states that graphic novels,

can enrich the students' experiences as a new way of imparting information, serving as transitions into more print-intensive works, enticing reluctant readers into prose books and, in some cases, offering literary experiences that linger in the mind long after the book is finished. (p. 115)

After discussing the benefits of using graphic novels in the classroom, we explore how graphic novels can be used to teach literacy skills such as drawing inferences. Graphic novels help develop this skill as students use the context of the pictures to comprehend the story. Teachers can also use graphic novels to help English Language Learners (ELLs) develop new vocabulary through recognition of the picture that is represented. ELLs can use the context clues of the pictures to help them understand the denotation of a particular word that may be presented in dialogue. In fact, Krashen (2004) found that graphic novels contain 20% more rare vocabulary than traditional chapter books. Graphic novels can be valuable to ELLs since they will often choose this genre for pleasure reading, which is particularly critical for the development of their reading skills (MacDonell, 2004). The key is that kids will read graphic novels, and as a result, they read more. Graphic novel readers read more overall, read more books, and have more positive attitudes toward reading (Krashen, 2004).

Furthermore, teachers can use graphic novels for more than the development of reading skills, extending their usefulness by incorporating writing activities such as dialogue

and description. Not only can writing be developed, but with all the various comic software available for free or minimal cost, teachers can also tap into students' technology competencies by having them create a graphic novel themselves. In that type of activity, students can put all their learned literacy skills into one final project as they become content creators. This means they will have to consider pictures, dialogue, and their own skills of employing technology in order to create a storyboard.

Graphic novels have also been acknowledged for their literary merit. Notable graphic novels include Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize; Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* received the Printz award in 2007; and Siena Cherson Siegel's *To Dance: A Ballerina's Graphic Novel* was awarded the Robert F. Sibert Medal for nonfiction in 2007. All of these reasons should make graphic novels attractive for teachers to use.

Wordless Graphic Novels

I start with a wordless graphic novel *Robot Dreams*, since it provides my students no choice but to "read" the pictures. This wordless graphic novel tells the story of the friendship of Robot and Dog. They do everything together, including swimming at the beach, after which Robot rusts and is unable to leave. As seasons pass, Robot is left on the beach to dream about how his life could be different, while other beachgoers use and abuse him. Dog goes through a series of unfulfilling relationships, and Robot is eventually put in a scrap yard, where he is discovered by a new friend and rebuilt. This story is about the loss of friendship, a theme that resonates with students of all ages.

My students are instructed to read *Robot Dreams* for class. When we discuss it, some of my students are initially confused by the squiggly lines Varon uses to represent Robot's dreams. They have little experience reading the frames and inferring what they mean. Chute (2008) states that "comics as a form require a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation" (p. 460). The panels in graphic novels can often disrupt the flow of the story, demanding that the reader makes meaning of the text.

My students like the theme of *Robot Dreams* but are usually upset with the reading experience because they are not used to this wordless type of text. I remind them how struggling readers must feel when reading print texts. Then we compare the different reading skills required by traditional print texts and graphic novels. It becomes clear that

reading graphic novels requires combining words and images to make meaning.

Next, I move students into small groups to practice a few activities they might use with their own students. I tell each group to write the narrative of *Robot Dreams* on sticky notes, pasting them on the appropriate pages. This activity is important because it shows them how students can pay attention to dialogue, plot, setting, and action. Teachers can use these stories to assess how well students have paid attention to the pictures and inferred the main ideas and details that make up the story.

Finally, we are ready to discuss the content of *Robot Dreams*, with its universal themes of friendship and loss. I always interject that the theme could be a lost love, which usually pushes my students back into the text in search of evidence to disprove my claim. We consider using graphic novels to teach close reading.

We also talk about how teachers could meet the Common Core Standards through this genre. Gavigan (2012) suggests that graphic novels fit well with the Common Core Standards:

- Grade 2, Reading Standard 7: Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting or plot.
- Grade 5, Reading Standard 7: Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).
- Grades 6-12, Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading: Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels. (p. 21)

Graphic novels extend across the Common Core, reaching all grade levels. Furthermore, the graphic novel can promote further understanding of plot through a digital text, visual elements, and as an example of text complexity.

After our discussion about the content of *Robot Dreams*, my students follow up in small groups. The activity is intended to show them how to honor students' multiple intelligences and to illustrate that worksheets or antiquated skill-and-drill activities are not needed to teach literacy skills. Examples of these small group extended writing activities include drawing the next page of the story if it were to continue;

representing the five parts of plot by recreating those scenes through Play Doh; rewriting the story so that Robot leaves Dog at the beach; and writing and performing a country song using the main points from the story. In these few activities, they are working on many literacy skills, including prediction, naming the parts of plot and knowing the main points of the story, considering an alternative viewpoint, and retelling the story.

From Comics Consumers to Creators

After I am certain that my students have begun to see the value of using the graphic novel in their classrooms, we discuss the different purposes for which they might use certain online, comic creation programs with their students. Creating comics can demonstrate detailed understanding of a topic. A teacher who wants to develop students' understanding of dialogue and sign-based literacy might use comic creations to extend these skills by having students create a comic. For ELLs, creating a comic provides a means to practice with language in a way that is not as intimidating as writing a paper.

I tell my students to play with three different comic creation websites that vary from simple to sophisticated. They are given the option of creating a comic about their content area or a milestone in their lives. I want them to think about using the comic creation software in a content pedagogical way and also a creative way. I introduce them to NCTE's Read, Write, and Think comic creator as the easiest one to use. Some said it was very user-friendly, noting that they could easily determine how many frames to use in a comic. Others, however, complained that the tool could only produce black-and-white comics, featured similar-looking characters, and was limited in background choices. But as one student pointed out, "It's quick and it gets the job done."

The next comic creation software I have them evaluate and play with is Bitstrips. Accessible through Facebook and its own website, it is unique in that users can create characters that look just like them. Being connected through Facebook has its advantages: friends that use Bitstrips can share their characters with ease. This feature could be quite beneficial in a classroom setting. Teachers could ask students to incorporate classmates into their own comics, provided that Facebook was accessible. Another possible use might require students to create comic versions of themselves at the beginning of the year, using certain frames to represent components of themselves that they would like to share with

classmates. Then, the class could create an entire graphic novel on their classmates. What an interesting way to have students get to know each other, and the result could be maintained as a bound copy of the classroom community graphic novel.

My students really enjoyed Bitstrips: it is in color, reflects their actual physical features, and best of all, it is free. They loved that you could make the characters look like people in real life, and the connection to Facebook was perceived as a perk. Two potential disadvantages are the detail required to create characters, which might overwhelm younger students and consume a significant amount of classroom time. Undeterred, one of my students, a math teacher, used Bitstrips to create a comic strip introducing the Pythagorean Theorem to her students (Figure 1).

The final comic creator I introduced to them was Comic Life 2. This cloud-based tool offers a 30-day free trial and an educator discount. My students really appreciated the options and backgrounds that could be created. They loved uploading pictures of themselves—and the software gave their pictures a comic look. Furthermore, the variety of templates for the backgrounds, the frames, and even the dialogue boxes were engaging. One student suggested she could use comic creations to focus on a particular writing skill such as dialogue or setting. A social studies teacher imagined that he could make historical figures come to life and create notes about those figures to be incorporated into a study guide for his students. An English teacher thought his students might create comic strip summaries of short stories.

Figure 1. Bitstrips Comic Strip

Clearly, graphic novels have many uses in the classroom today. Teacher educators must spread the word about their benefits to other educators. We need to redefine reading, acknowledge that graphic novels have literary merit and meet Common Core Standards Teaching in-service teachers the value of using different comic creators can only open up the multiple possibilities of what can be done within the classroom by teachers and students alike. Exposing teachers to graphic novels and generating activities around them can promote the acceptance of the genre.

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