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THEORY

Protecting Pedagogical Choice: Theory, Graphic Novels, and Textual Complexity

LISA SCHADE ECKERT

With the publication of many research and pedagogical journal articles in recent years touting the viability, flexibility, and credibility of including graphic novels in English language arts instruction, as well as decades of research indicating that students can, and should, engage in a much wider variety of literate behaviors in an intentional, critical way, it is still useful for teachers and teacher educators to articulate the importance of including multimodal text in ELA curricula. However, given the recent announcement from the Business Roundtable, a group of corporate executives who have specific interests in influencing K-12 curricula, that a panel is currently being implemented to vet instructional materials that will be deemed appropriate for inclusion in Common Core lessons, it becomes imperative that educators take control of curricula.

In this article I will offer theoretical approaches for teaching graphic novels; my purpose is to discuss and demonstrate the breadth of opportunities for literacy instruction with graphic texts—and the ways in which graphic novels provide engaging and intellectually challenging material for meeting state and national standards for teaching literary and informational texts. I also am writing this to encourage teachers to take control of their curricula, to determine ways in which texts meet the criteria for appropriate “text complexity,” not to wait for a panel of non-educators to determine what texts will be “approved” for inclusion in CCSS aligned curricula. I will articulate how theory, spanning textual, cultural, and post-colonial stances, offers both the means and the rationale for including graphic novels in literacy/literature curricula which is aligned with CCSS. Graphic texts, online publications and communication, and hybrid (combined graphic and written text) literature can provide accessible, yet sophisticated, interpretive environments for student exploration and critical interpretation.

One place to begin is with the concept of “Text Complexity.” The criteria for determining text complexity is exhaustively defined in Appendix A of the published Common Core standards; all of the direct references noted in this article are taken from that document and noted by page number. Teachers and teacher educators are encouraged to review the document at http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf. The document is laden with research reviving the argument that American students are unsophisticated readers who are reading at “levels” far beneath that which is appropriate for their age or grade.

Those of us who have been teaching for more than 15 years recognize the recycled *Why Johnny Can't Read*, *A Nation at Risk*, and No Child Left Behind rhetoric, which exists to perpetuate the myth of failing schools. This myth, according to Diane Ravitch in *Reign of Error* (2013), is perpetuated to further the goals of those who would privatize American schools; in fact, the gains in American students' NAEP reading scores since 1996 have been “slow, steady, and significant” (p. 57) and not indicative of an illiterate populace. My own research and experience in teaching literature and literary theory in secondary English students can and do read from a critical stance if given the opportunity and support to do so (Eckert, 2006).

Yet, in part to encourage American schools to spend dollars on packaged programs touting Common Core alignment, and in part to convey the fear that contemporary American students will overly rely on “text-free or text-light sources, such as video, podcasts, and tweets” (Appendix A, p. 4) in lieu of what might be described as “real” reading, the Common Core defines textual complexity in ways that are clearly grounded in New Critical theory and textual exegesis. This fits with the Business Roundtable's agenda, articulated in a recent report (Business Roundtable, 2013), which ranks the organizations priorities in the Table of Contents: “Priority #1: Fully Adopt and Implement the Common Core Standards” which is only slightly less condescending than

“Priority #3: Develop More Effective Teachers.” But, as many reading and literature teachers know, this is the same textbook literacy instruction that we’ve been supplementing and problematizing since Kenneth Goodman and Louise Rosenblatt rocked the reading and literature worlds respectively with miscue analysis and transactional theory.

In fact, close analysis of the CCSS language defining text complexity reveals rhetoric that is ambiguous enough to provide plenty of rationale for the inclusion of a variety of textual genre. For example, Appendix A notes “unconventional text” as a key concept in determining textual complexity, citing figurative and ironic language, complex and sophisticated themes, and cultural and literary knowledge as specific criteria. Educators are encouraged to “employ professional judgment” (p. 7) to include qualitative and quantitative data to determine whether a text is appropriately complex for

Scholars in literary interpretation and theoretical analysis of text have long complicated the definition of “text” and examined the role of multimodality in narrative structure. For example, the likes of Umberto Eco, Dorothy Parker, and Roland Barthes were applying critical concepts to comics long before the term graphic novel became pedagogically provocative. I offer these examples, though there are numerous other literary heavy hitters who have addressed the medium, because each of these writers and theorists is often anthologized and touted as canonical, which lends them a particular credibility in the development of literary analysis and pedagogy that is recognized in the development of policy initiatives like the CCSS. I am certainly not arguing that these examples should supersede others; they are just interesting and illustrative in the brief space I have here. Umberto Eco published a lengthy analysis of Superman in 1962

Figure 1. From *AMERICAN BORN CHINESE* © 2006 by Gene Luen Yang. Reprinted by permission of First Second Books. All rights reserved.

their students. Qualitative data, according to this document, should emphasize the purpose, structure, language conventionality and “Knowledge Demands” (p. 5) of the text; educators are encouraged to draw upon quantitative data sources which include Lexile scores, the skill of “identifying central ideas,” and evaluating the syntactic complexity of sentences (p. 7).

These criteria for determining appropriate text complexity readily support including graphic text in the ELA curriculum. The issue for educators, then, is deciding if they wish to include graphic novels, using their “professional judgment” to develop the lesson and unit plans to do so, which is another way of saying using “pedagogical goals” or “instructional design” or any number of ways in which educators discuss and make decisions about how they choose texts.

entitled “The Myth of Superman” (Eco). In this essay, Eco argues that an “analysis of temporal structures in Superman has offered us the image of a way of telling stories which would seem to be fundamentally tied to pedagogic principles that govern [a hegemonic] society” (emphasis in original, p. 19); a society in which the individual is caught up in mass media which generates what he calls the “high-redundance message....the greater part of popular narrative is a narrative of redundancy” (emphasis in original, p. 21).

This seems a fitting message in light of the recursive (and consequently redundant) cycle of “failing schools” messaging which drives educational policy and political fear-mongering; ironically, Eco’s analysis of the “image of telling stories” also provides a model for the intellectual and theoretical importance of the analysis of multimodal

text: offering another perspective and/or narrative form to offset mass media redundancies. Dorothy Parker, in characteristically blunt and caustic prose, published a letter titled “A Mash Note to Crockett Johnson” in 1943 (*PM Magazine*) confessing her love for his comic Barnaby, saying “if the adventures of Barnaby constitute a comic strip, then so do those of Huckleberry Finn” (16).

Similarly, Roland Barthes explores the “semiology of images” in *The Rhetoric of the Image* (1977). Semiotics is the study of signifying systems; a word in a given text is a signifier and the thing (whether a concrete item or an abstract concept) the word represents is the signified; images and other iconic signs function within a text in the same way. Instructional methods addressing signifying systems in standardized curricula often privilege ‘traditional’ analytical skills of decoding and encoding written textual signs; as Barthes argues, these

I argue that reading and analyzing graphic novels meet the criteria noted: they include figurative language, complex and sophisticated themes, and require cultural and literary knowledge.

can be broadened to include decoding varied communication media, such as visual signifying systems as well. These important contributions have a significant role in the development of literature pedagogy, and, combined with the instructional practices described by the contributors to this issue of *LAJM*, clearly indicate that graphic novels are appropriate and challenging texts to include in a teacher’s repertoire of literature and reading curricular materials.

I offer these examples to demonstrate that reading graphic novels is not as straightforward as looking at pictures to illustrate a written text and is more complex than code switching; graphics add layers of signifiers to a semiotic system, and layers of complexity for the reader. Instead of consisting of an unproblematic kind of ‘translation’ from one semiotic mode into another, the images and text form a complex, interrelated semiotic system: a layered interaction of multiple semiotic systems within a text. Rather than simply adding another decoding task to enhance a text, the sequential art of a graphic novel multiplies the interpretive challenges and opportunities for analysis and interpretation. Engaging in critical examination of how the visual elements of a graphic novel interact with text is a complex cognitive exercise that spans content area and grade level.

Another theoretical approach particularly suited for the study of graphic novels is Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies theorists often concentrate on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, race, social class,

and/or gender. Cultural Studies supposes a transformative pedagogy by challenging teachers to redefine what it is that they do in a classroom, how they define concepts like “text” and “reading” and by involving students in the understanding and analysis of what they already know. Culturally responsive pedagogy focuses on social justice in designing instruction to interrogate these aspects of society. For example, a cultural analysis of literature is concerned with the identification of what constitutes “text” (written text, images, paintings, etc.), how texts are endowed with social meanings or “truth,” and how they come to be valued by particular readers. The question of what is “literature” as opposed to “popular fiction” or which texts are worthy of academic analysis and which should be relegated for “pleasure reading” are central to cultural studies.

Engaging in cultural studies and interpretation helps students to come to terms with different conceptions of value, different and perhaps incommensurate valuing processes and their relation to social forces and social positions. In other words, culturally responsive teaching emphasizes noted researcher Paulo Friere’s concept of teaching “with” students, not “to” or “for” them. The reader’s interpretive gaze shifts from the text as self-contained to its cultural and social framings, within which students are themselves implicated and challenged; while at the same time it opens a potentially fruitful methodological exchange between the distinct protocols of interpretation that apply in the social sciences and the textual disciplines (in other words, both informational and narrative texts).

Graphic novels often include text, images, visuals, and narrative themes that fall outside the dominant realm of cultural aesthetics and can, therefore, play an important role in implementing culturally responsive pedagogies. While it is true that culturally responsive teaching is more than simply adding texts by ethnically/socio-economically marginalized authors (James Banks, noted educational researcher specializing in multicultural education, calls superficial neoliberal correctness “Heroes and Holidays”); it is the willingness to include unfamiliar and/or controversial subject matter as well as interrogating the socio-cultural forces that marginalize some voices while privileging others.

Openly questioning the status quo, questioning normativity, and addressing tensions between political correctness and honest discussion of gender, race, and sexual orientation comes closer to equity pedagogy and transformative learning about other socio-cultural traditions; graphic novels

can extend such questioning and include diverse voices in a teacher's instructional repertoire.

For example, *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) includes the character of Chin Kee, an intentionally offensive caricature of Asian Americans, providing a foil for the teenage protagonist, Jin Wang, who tries desperately to fit in at his suburban American high school. Yang layers the separate narratives of Jin Wang, Chin Kee, and the Chinese mythological character of Monkey King, to confront issues of adolescent outsider identity and the struggle to fit in. The art of the narrative captures the moment in which Jin Wang begins to clearly develop a sense of authentic identity and embraces his cultural ethnicity more vividly and succinctly than mere words ever could; the "moment within moment" peculiar to graphic novels (see Figure 1). Similarly, the character of Anya in *Anya's Ghost* (Broskol 2011) feels different because her family immigrated to the United States from Russia when she was young. After working to overcome her accent, she strives to be "normal" at her private high school; her encounter with a mysterious ghost seems helpful in this quest...at first.

To return to the definition of "text complexity" from Appendix A of the Common Core Standards, I argue that reading and analyzing graphic novels meet the criteria noted: they include figurative language, complex and sophisticated themes, and require cultural and literary knowledge. Publishers are also jumping on the CCSS text complexity bandwagon. For example, Diamond Book Publishers, has developed a web page for teachers noting which of the graphic novels they offer are appropriate for CCSS aligned curricula (Diamond Book Distributors, 2013). The Business Roundtable panel noted at the beginning of this paper is already working to determine which texts are privileged with the CCSS instructional framework. I urge teachers and teacher educators to "employ professional judgment" and, whether it includes graphic novels or not, take control of the curriculum and the high-redundancy narrative before both take control of them.

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