Jennifer Archuleta

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Professor Joanne de Groot

**Literature Review: Comics and their Educational Value**

***Research Question:*** Can comic books and graphic novels [1] be used as an effective teaching tool in the classroom?

***Introduction***

Since the 1930s our culture has attached negative stigma to the comic book medium (Hajdu, 2008). Public perception that comic books were harmful to the literacy and psychology state of children grew in force (Nyberg, 1998). Though acceptance of the medium has grown immensely since that time, the negative stigma surrounding comic books persists today. I originally became interested in this topic when I ventured into the world of comics as an undergraduate in college. I have been reading graphic novels for many years now, and being a member of the comics community has exposed me first hand to the stigma that comics books continue to have. Additionally, working in the children’s department of a bustling urban public library has also given me another perspective. On a daily basis I see children rush to our graphic novel section, looking for their next great read. I witness the light that they get in their eyes when they are truly excited and engaged with reading. With goals of being a children’s librarian, this love of books, especially comic books, gives me great joy and hope.

At the same time, I personally have had no experience with using comic books in an educational capacity and did not become exposed to this idea until this semester. Through a graphic novels course that I am taking, I became acquainted with current research about the potential of comics in education. As I began preliminary research on this topic I began to ponder the following questions as I learned more about how and why comics are used in education today:

* Is there a place for comics in classrooms?
* Are all types of comics and graphic novels suitable for classroom use, or are only specifically created comic textbooks appropriate?
* Will the use of comic books in the classroom harm or help the learning process?
* Can the use of comics and graphic novels be incorporated to curricula that rely upon the strict adherence to institutional educational standards (i.e. Common Core)?
* Will the use of comic books engage reluctant learners? Will they bore above-average learners?

I present in this integrated literature review an overview of the research, writings, and personal stories produced by scholars who are exploring this new and exciting body of work. Specifically in I explore four broad topics in which the literature I have reviewed fall into which show how comics: support new forms of literacy, are an educational tool for all ages, can scaffold learning, and can support institutional teaching standards. We begin with one of the most prevalent arguments in support of the use of comics and graphic novels in education.

***Comic Books as a Tool to Support New Forms of Literacy***

It has been argued by many scholars that literacy as it exists traditionally is being challenged by 21st century technologies. Researchers Brozo and Mayville (2012) argue that today’s world is a “mediasphere…saturated by inescapable, ever-evolving, and competing media that both flow through us and…are created by us” (p. 12) which demands that our education systems meet the needs of students who live and make meaning in these realities. Hassett and Schieble (2007) also point out “the social, cultural, and political environment” (p. 62) of our world is shaped by globalization and “has seen an emergence of greater reliability on visual modes of communication” (p. 62). Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, and Frey (2012) further advance the transformation of the concept of literacy by framing it as “more than just basic proficiency with written text to include other types of texts and sign systems” (p. 23).

It is important to prepare the students of today with the skills and proficiencies they need to succeed both in and out of the classroom. Rapp (2011) expands on the concept of literacy as beyond only focusing on reading skills in order to “help students develop core practices by integrating text and visual information in the service of building meaning” (p. 64). Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011) argue that the complication of the concept of literacy is important to the lives of students because they “meet with greater success when offered a wider range of texts and activities” (p. 602), and that proficiency with such texts “will begin to be a matter of survival, especially in the workplace” (p. 602). Dallacqua (2012) also believes that these skills are crucial to students’ everyday lives because there is “increasing demand for a workforce and citizenry that is comfortable with multiple literacies, as opposed to one factory model of literacy” (p. 368).

The issue thus turns to how these new literacies are being addressed in education. Hassett and Schieble (2007) contend that though these new forms of communication are pervasive in our everyday lives, “back at the school, literacy instruction is dominated by traditional texts and alphabet print” (p. 62). Norton (2003) specifically addresses this challenge of educators to “reconceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces in which children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts including visual, written, spoken, auditory, and performative” (p. 146). Brozo and Mayville (2012) believe that if this type of multimodal discourse is promoted and validated in the school setting it could help to “increase engagement in literacy and content learning” (p. 12) while at the same time build “on students’ strengths for developing academic knowledge and skills” (p. 13).

Graphic novel advocates believe the format is ideally positioned to be added to classroom curricula to support these emerging forms of literacy. Dallacqua (2012) maintains that comics are able to lend themselves to the multimodal concept of literacy because they require visual literacy: “the ability to create, read, and/or understand visual messages” (p. 365), while at the same time “lend themselves to teaching literary devices” (p. 365) and require critical literacy skills. Hoover (2012) also believes that comics can be used to “arm students with the critical literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse system of meaning making” (p. 177) because they “rely on the synthesis of textual and visual information” (p. 177). Rapp (2011) argues that “comic books can teach literacy skills and critical thinking in ways that other formats can’t” (p. 64). Schwarz (2002) notes that graphic novels have great appeal, are useful to the curriculum, promote literacy, and may even “require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone” (p. 263). Despite all of this support, Norton (2003) found evidence that “teachers remain ambivalent about the place of comic books within educational practice” (p. 146).

Each of these scholars have discussed the transformation of the concept of literacy from one solely focused on the reading and writing of text to a broader understanding that requires meaning-making in multimodal formats. Each of these authors have also argued that this changing idea of literacy requires appropriate texts to meet the needs of students who must be proficient in them both in and out of school. Overwhelmingly, each of these authors believes that comics, with their unique mix of visual and text, are perfectly situated for the classroom to teach and strengthen multimodal literacies. The next section will overview some of the different generational groups of students that educators, researchers and scholars have used graphic novels with in an educational setting.

***Comic Books as Educational Tool for All Ages***

The prevalent stigma surrounding comic books often wrongly miscategorizes them as “unsophisticated, disposable entertainment, or material written to the lowest common denominator” (Rapp, 2011, p. 64). Researchers have combated these ideas with a diverse and wide array of students of varying ages using the format of comics and graphic novels.

First we begin with the use of comics in primary education which span kindergarten through eighth grade. The majority of the research literature has been conducted with students that fall into these grade ranges. Dallacqua (2012) conducted a qualitative study with her fifth grade classroom to explore learning literary devices using graphic novels. Norton (2003) conducted her research with a group of *Archie* readers ranging from the fifth to seventh grades. Ranker (2007) conducted research in a first grade English as a Second Language classroom in which comics were used as read-alouds. Brozo and Mayville (2012) researched the effects of using a chemistry comic textbook in Mayville’s eighth grade classroom. Vassilikopoulou, Retalis, Nezi, and Boloudakis (2011) worked with middle school students in Athens, Greece to research the effects of the creation of Web comics in the learning of diet and nutrition habits.

The use of comics in with older students and in adult education has been much less than in primary education, but it has not been completely absent. Snowball (2005) notes that this age group is important to consider because, “recreational reading decreases as students progress through school” (p. 43). Studies have shown that students “who read for pleasure show improvement in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, and they acquire these skills involuntarily and without conscious effort” (Snowball, 2005, p. 43). Hughes et al. (2011) worked with at-risk high school students who learned about graphic novels and the created their own comics. Hosler and Boomer (2011) conducted quantitative research with college students to understand how students learned using a standard biology textbook and a comic biology textbook. Lastly, Hammond and Danaher (2012) conducted research with adult refugees learning English in New Zealand to explore the perceptions of the value of comic books.

These varied research studies indicate that the majority of comic books used in the classroom are with children and adolescents, but that it is not limited to these age ranges. Indeed the use of comic books in an educational setting with older students in high school, secondary education, and adult education suggest that the format is adaptable to students of all ages and can help them maintain literacy skills throughout their educational lives. The next section will explore some of the many ways that comics and graphic novels have been used in these different classrooms to scaffold learning.

***Comic Books as a Scaffold to Learning***

This section is an exploration of the specific ways that comics have been used in education to teach different content areas and to engage and motivate learners. The term scaffold is used here because graphic novels are the tool used by educators and scholars to teach varied content to students and as such they help to support learning in multiple and varied ways.

Dallacqua (2012), a teacher, used comic books to introduce literary devices to her students. Through her research she found that introducing students to difficult literary devices in comic books helped her students to understand and identify these concepts in traditional print-based texts. She believes that comics have the potential to “grab students’ attention, help them grasp difficult literary concepts, and visualize those concepts as they scaffold into other modes of readings” (p. 376).

Brozo and Mayville (2012) and Hosler and Boomer (2011) used graphic novels in their classrooms to scaffold learning about different scientific topics. Brozo and Mayville (2012) explored the use of a chemistry graphic novel to “help students deeply understand…new vocabulary and to reinforce the familiar vocabulary by applying it to the new concepts” (p. 14). Students were extremely engaged with the comic textbook and felt the format helped them to remember the material better (Brozo & Mayville, 2012). Additionally, students performed much better on their quiz on the material presented in the comic textbook (Brozo & Mayville, 2012). Hosler and Boomer (2011) used a comic biology textbook in Hosler’s college courses. They found that non-biology majors had significant improvement in their content knowledge and their attitudes towards biology with the use of the comic textbook and they argue that “comic book stories lose nothing to traditional textbooks while having the added potential benefit of improving attitudes about biology” (p. 316).

Researchers have also explored how the creation of comics by students can help to scaffold learning. Hughes et al. (2011) taught high school students about visual literacy and allowed for them to create their own comics. Students were able to hone their critical thinking skills and “developed multimodal literacy skills by communicating…in images and text” (p. 611). Additionally, “these students, who would actively resist traditional writing assignments…were able to develop their own stories about their lives in meaningful ways” (Hughes et al., 2011, p. 610) and the students were more motivated and engaged. Vassilikopoulou et al. (2011) also explored in their research how students who created their own Web comics learned. They (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2011) found that students overwhelmingly “preferred that their courses to be taught with the help of digital comics” (p. 122) and that “the creation of digital comics help to them comprehend better the way in which the narration of a story is organized” (p. 122).

Hammond and Danaher (2012) and Ranker (2007) studied the use of comic books in classrooms with English language learners. Hammond and Danaher (2012) explored the use of comic books with adult refugee English learners in New Zealand. The learners found the comic books as “valuable and enjoyable” (p. 201) and the comics engaged them, which in turn encouraged them read outside of the classroom. This offered the students greater exposure to the language, and provided them with “a model for understanding and using vocabulary in context” (Hammond & Danaher, 2012, p. 201). Ranker (2007) explored the use of comics as read-alouds with first grade English language learners. The comics engaged students “in a wide variety of texts and diverse literary practices” (Ranker, 2007, p. 304) and students were “introduced to reading comics specifically, as well as the broader idea of reading media texts from a critical perspective” (p. 304). The comics also provided “interesting, motivating reading material” (Ranker, 2007, p. 304) that helped to engage students in the learning of reading processes.

Comics have been used in a myriad of ways to help scaffold learning of different kinds of content and the important skills students need to meet challenges both in and out of the classroom. The use of graphic novels in each of these studies was successful with students because they were able to engage and motivate them which helped to keep their interest in the subject matter. The next section will explore how comics can be successfully integrated into education while maintaining institutional teaching standards.

***Comics as a Support for Institutional Teaching Standards***

It has been argued by scholars in the literature thus far that comics could be a tool to support the transforming concept of literacy. A question arises of how educators can incorporate comics into their classrooms when they may have little control over institutional teaching and other standards imposed upon them.

Gann (2013) argues that “school librarians…should consider graphic novels as a unique resource for meeting standards for collection development and student learning” (p. 76). Gann (2013) specifically highlights the learning standards provided by the American Association of School Librarians which refer to the concepts of multiple formats and visual literacy. Gann (2013) argues that the inclusion of these concepts in the standards, “encourage the use of graphic novels in multiple reading and learning activities” (p. 77). Educational comics advocate, Monnin (2013), discusses in depth how graphic novels can be incorporated into the growing implementation of the Common Core Standards (CCS) in education. Monnin (2013) argues that the CCS are friendly to graphic novels because they are “broadly and uniquely written” (p. 56) which allows for a “wide range of interpretation” (p. 56). Monnin (2013) also provides an extensive chart that highlights certain CCS for reading, along with suggestions of specific comics and related activities to illustrate how they can be incorporated to support the standards. Hoover (2012) also provides a discussion of educational guideline standards for college students. The author (Hoover, 2012) specifically breaks down some of the Association of College and Research Libraries and the Image Resources Interest Group (ACRL/IRIG) Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Learning outcomes along with suggestions of activities for students using comics to meet these outcomes. Hoover (2012) also provides in-depth examples of graphic novel assignments and activities that meet multiple outcomes of the ACRL/IRIG Standards and notes that there are many other possibilities because “there are often a number of critical thinking and information literacy outcomes that can be addressed in the context of working with any particular graphic novel” (p. 184).

These explorations of learning standards and the particular ways that graphic novels can support them is a key argument for the use of the format in education. While these pieces each discuss different standards they also illustrate the many ways graphic novels are flexible and can adapt to many different styles and understandings of education and learning.

***Conclusion and Future Research***

As the literature shows, comic books and graphic novels are a potential tool in educational practice that can: support emerging forms of literacy, scaffold the learning of different content, be adapted for use by students of all ages and for different institutional teaching standards, and they can do so while also engaging and motivating students. Many of the research studies presented in this review show the unique ways that educators are using graphic novels, but there are several areas of this topic that still need to be explored.

All of the studies presented here discuss the positive benefits of the use of comics in the classroom, but it is also important to note that Lapp et al. (2012) found that many teachers are not utilizing the format in their classrooms. Future research on why teachers are reluctant to incorporate comics into their curricula is needed to better understand the challenges they face. Most of these studies have also only explored the short-term effects of using comics in the classroom, usually focusing on one subject area or one class. A longer and more in-depth study would be meaningful to understand the larger impacts the format could have on student success. Additionally, most of the literature focuses on the educational lives of children and adolescents. More research with high school, college, and adult students is needed to provide a well-rounded view of how the use of comics can impact the lives of learners of all ages. Up to now, comics have only been hypothetically framed as able to be adapted and used to support different institutional teaching and learning standards. A comparative study of students who use and don’t use comics to meet the outcome of such standards is needed to understand their impact on student success. Comics seem to be a good fit for the emerging multimodal concept of literacy, but as Norton (2003) notes this concept also includes the spoken, auditory, and performative, all of which are absent in comics. A comparative study of the use of comics and of a different format that covers these other aspects of multimodal literacy is needed to determine whether comics are the best tool to support it. Lastly, a study of how many teachers currently use comics in their classrooms would be enlightening as to how far this field of research has made progress in recent years. Comics and graphic novels seem to be a wonderful, if little used, educational resource. I am excited as a scholar to contribute new knowledge with my own future research to this growing body of literature.

***Note***

[1] I use the terms “comic book” and “graphic novel” interchangeably in this paper. There is an ongoing debate within the community as to how these terms are defined and their differences and similarities. Since there is no agreed upon consensus about how these terms are defined and for the sake of clarity I choose to treat them as reference to the same thing.

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