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THE CASE FOR GRAPHIC NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Many libraries and librarians have embraced graphic novels. A number of books, articles, and presentations focus on the history of the medium and offer advice on building and maintaining collections. Few, however, give attention to the integration of graphic novels into a library's instructional efforts. This paper explores the characteristics of graphic novels that make them a valuable resource for research and information literacy instruction, identifies skills and competencies that can be taught through the study of graphic novels, and provides specific examples of how to incorporate graphic novels into instruction.

INTRODUCTION

It could be argued that 1986 was the year of the graphic novel. This year included the publication of the first volume of *Maus*, the release of the first issue of *Watchmen*, and the entire serial run of *The Dark Knight Returns*. Although none of the aforementioned works were originally printed as graphic novels, all three were serialized before being collected and re-released; it would be difficult to ignore the impact that they have had on the medium. Since 1986, graphic novels have grown considerably, both in sophistication and popularity, to the point where they deserve attention in higher education. This is especially true for academic librarians. Current academic library literature includes a good deal of scholarship on the history of the medium and offers advice on building and maintaining collections (Ellis & Highsmith, 2000; Nyberg, 2010) but very little about how to integrate graphic novels into instruction. This paper explores the characteristics of graphic novels that make them a valuable resource for librarians who focus on research and information literacy instruction, identifies skills and competencies that can be taught through the study of graphic novels, and provides specific examples of how to incorporate graphic novels into instruction.

WHAT ARE GRAPHIC NOVELS?

To make best use of graphic novels, it is important that educators and scholars approach them in a serious manner. This is certainly happening, but for some scholars, and more importantly students, the stereotype of comics as intellectually-devoid fodder aimed at the most basic sensibilities of adolescent boys persists. Clarifying terminology and establishing context can help to dispel such misperceptions.

A number of labels have been used to describe the medium commonly referred to as the graphic novel. Comics icon Will Eisner (2008) considered both comics and graphic novels to be sequential art, which he defined as, “a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (p. xi). Chute (2008) suggests the use of the term “graphic narrative” instead of graphic novel as many “graphic novels” are non-fiction and defines graphic narrative as, “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (p. 453). In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (1994) defines comics as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 20). The discussion over the most appropriate term will likely continue for some time. This paper will consider a graphic novel to be a “book-length work in the medium of comics,” Chute’s definition of graphic narrative informed by McCloud’s definition of comics. The term comics will sometimes be used in place of the term graphic novels as all graphic novels are comics.

Many scholars classify graphic novels as a medium or format rather than a genre. McCloud, in reference to his definition of comics, states, “to define comics, we must first do a little aesthetic surgery and separate form from content! The artform – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (p. 6). Carter (2008) identifies a tendency among many first-time readers, and even some with a great deal of experience with graphic novels, mistakenly to view them as a genre instead of a format. He states, “regardless of the conscientious scholars and creators who have written on

the graphic novel as being a form beyond genre, many students, teachers, and professors continue to refer to sequential art narration (comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels) as a genre rather than, as I think is more accurate, a form or format. This haunts me.” Carter also suggests that genre is a “reductivist term when it applies to sequential art narratives,” and provides a wide range of examples and explanations, including McCloud’s, that support the case for classification as a format. The distinction is hardly arbitrary. Treating graphic novels as a format or medium, on par with more established and respected media such as print-only texts and film, is a good first step towards unlocking their full potential and opening up possibilities for integration into educational efforts.

CURRENT USE IN ACADEMIA

While it is difficult to say whether or not graphic novels are widely accepted in higher education, they are certainly being used. Courses devoted entirely to the study of comics and graphic novels exist in both undergraduate and graduate contexts (Chute, 2010; Nel, 2010; Sample, 2010). It is reasonable to believe that an even greater number employ graphic novels as readings even though the medium itself is not the main focus of the course. Graphic novels have also been used in one campus/one book programs and other campus events (Fister, 2011).

CURRENT ACADEMIC LIBRARY LITERATURE

Ellis and Highsmith (2000), and more recently, Nyberg (2010) have surveyed the overall landscape of library literature on comics and graphic novels. A great deal of the literature is focused on collection

analysis and development. Toren (2010), Werthmann (2010), and Wagner (2010) have all surveyed the graphic novel holdings of ARL libraries. Williams and Peterson (2009) focused their collection study on titles that were recommended for teenagers and libraries which supported teacher education and library science programs. Librarians interested in building and developing collections have a significant number of books and articles from which to choose. Behler’s (2006) article includes an annotated bibliography of resources that can assist selectors in developing a collection and also a short core list. Haines (2007) describes a hands-on approach to evaluating needs and selecting titles while also succinctly addressing issues related to acquisition, cataloging, access, and preservation. Other articles, most notably, O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay (2006), focus on collection-related aspects beyond development including cataloging and promotion.

WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS?

There is no doubt that today’s college students live within an increasingly complex information environment, and preparing them to engage with such an environment in an active and informed way is one of the many challenges faced by librarians. Many educators have already sounded calls to action. The need for instruction in texts that contain multiple modes of information and require active participation on the part of the reader, such as graphic novels, is perhaps greater now than ever before. Harris (2006) identifies a decline in the dominance of exclusively text-based sources of information in modern society and challenges those involved in information literacy education to address the situation in a thoughtful way:

The reality of the contemporary information economy is that images are in higher circulation and higher demand than words and print, this should not suggest that we create an opposing hierarchy where images rule words, but understanding the shifting relationship between word and image at this juncture in information literacy theory is imperative. While few have questioned the fact that verbal and alphabetic literacies must be learned, a lack of sensitivity to (or fear of) images and visual texts has obscured the need for instruction in reading images. As images become ever-present in the communication of information between entities, communities, and individuals, librarians and related professionals must consider the visual in any discussion of information literacy. (p. 213).

Harris does not directly identify graphic novels as a context for providing instruction that can meet the challenges of the economy he describes, but others have made this very connection. Jacobs (2007) suggests, “By situating our thinking about comics, literacy, and education within a framework that views literacy as occurring in multiple modes, we can use comics to greater effectiveness in our teaching at all levels by helping us to arm students with the critical-literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making” (p. 21). Because graphic novels rely on the synthesis of textual and visual information to create meaning, their potential value is difficult to ignore.

There is even more at stake. Beyond developing key literacy skills, Carter (2008)

suggests that utilizing graphic novels and other non-traditional sources of information in education can be a means of challenging long-held hierarchical notions of what constitutes appropriate discourse. He states, “If we find ourselves refusing to accept comics and graphic novels in our classrooms, or intentionally ignoring their potential, we are in reality making powerful political statements. These statements might suggest that we do not care much for others who think, read, and decode differently from the narrowest notion of reading and literacy” (p. 53). Carter is not alone in this view. Many have advocated the adoption of a more critical approach towards information literacy instruction. Elmborg (2002) suggests that past conceptualizations of literacy privilege certain academic and socio-cultural values and were often overly narrow in scope, to the point of creating, “a homogeneous ideal” (p. 195) of literacy. Elmborg writes, “In the emerging environment, literacy can no longer be approached in this way. We need to talk instead about multiple literacies, both in terms of diversity in human cultures and diversity in message formats” (p. 195). Including graphic novels in instruction is certainly not a magic bullet for combating entrenched views of literacy within academia, but it is one way to start chipping away at some of the barriers. Having identified some issues that make graphic novels a promising platform for addressing a variety of educational challenges, an examination of some of the specific skills and competencies that can be taught and assessed in the context of the medium is warranted.

DECODING COMICS, AKA, MEDIA
LITERACY, MULTIMODAL
LITERACY, INFORMATION
LITERACY, AND VISUAL LITERACY

Comics, and by extension graphic novels, rely on a set of conventions, and navigating these conventions requires readers to possess and apply a robust repertoire of information literacy skills. Eisner (2008) wrote, “In its most economical state, 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 – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the “grammar” of sequential art” (p. 8). The act of interpreting and applying these conventions when reading a graphic novel has been referred to as decoding. Learning how to decode involves developing an understanding of the conventions of the medium and gaining experience synthesizing image and text-based information.

Much of the research and writing focused on the benefits of teaching decoding can be found in K-12 literature. The terms used by K-12 authors to categorize decoding are different than those likely to be employed in higher education to describe similar processes (i.e., critical thinking, visual literacy, and information literacy), but the underlying concepts and competencies are closely aligned. As Harris (2006) suggests:

information literacy is not “mutually exclusive” in relation to the other literacies. Functional reading literacy, print literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, and the new “multimodal” literacies discussed in some disciplines all interact along with information literacy strategies” (p. 214).

Schwarz (2006 & 2007) considers the act of decoding to fall under the heading of “media literacy”. Aufderheide’s (1993)

report on the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy describes media literacy as, “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes” (p. 6) The report also notes that the basic definition was open to some interpretation, and later refers to a “media literate person” as one who, “can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media” (p. 9). Schwarz (2005) notes that the 1992 definition is widely accepted and employed, but also that there is debate over the term in the literature and variation in how the term and concept are put into practice by educators and institutions. Schwarz (2007) later states, “the graphic novel invites media literacy education which includes information and visual literacy. The unique combination of print and pictures opens up possibilities for looking at new content and for examining how diverse kinds of texts make meaning to readers” (p. 2).

Schwarz’s focus on the inter-relationship between textual and visual information, and the importance of understanding the mechanics of comics is echoed in an alternative categorization by Jacobs (2007), which places decoding within the context of multimodal literacy. “Multimodal” is a term that Cope and Kalantzis (2000) use to describe media, “in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (p. 5). Jacobs suggests:

Reading and writing multimodal texts, then, is an active process, both for creators and for readers who by necessity engage in the active production of meaning and who use all resources available to them based on their familiarity with the comics medium and its inherent grammars, their histories,

life experience, and interests. In turn, every act of creating meaning from a multimodal text, happening as it does at the intersection of structure and agency, contributes to the ongoing process of becoming a multimodal literate person. By teaching students to become conscious and critical of the ways in which they make meaning from multimodal texts such as comics, we can also teach students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts (p. 24).

While decoding is certainly a worthwhile skill to learn in and of itself, the suggestion that doing so provides students with a context from which to begin critically examining the mechanics of other mediums

is exciting.

For academic librarians, the act of decoding is likely to be classified under the headings of critical thinking, information literacy, or visual literacy. By using ACRL’s (2000) *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* as a medium of translation and articulation, it is possible to describe the process of decoding comics in familiar terms. If graphic novels are treated as a source of information, and the act of decoding comics as a means of accessing, evaluating, and synthesizing information, then a few outcomes are easy matches. See *Table 1: ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards – Outcomes with Example Student Actions*.

Hattwig, Burgess, Bussert, & Medialle’s

TABLE 1 — ACRL INFORMATION LITERACY COMPETENCY STANDARDS – OUTCOMES WITH EXAMPLE STUDENT ACTIONS	
<i>ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards - Outcomes</i>	<i>Example Student Action, The student can...</i>
3.2.B. Analyzes the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods.	Use concepts from <i>Understanding Comics</i> to interpret the meaning of comic-specific devices such as panels, closure, and motion lines in <i>American Born Chinese</i> .
3.2.D. Recognizes the cultural, physical, or other context within which the information was created and understands the impact of context on interpreting the information	Recognize that Joe Sacco is simultaneously an outside observer, active participant, and narrator for many of the events recounted in <i>Palestine</i> . Can articulate how these factors affect a reader’s interpretation of comic-specific devices in the text.
3.3.A. Recognizes interrelationships among concepts and combines them into potentially useful primary statements with supporting evidence	Examine both image-based and textual information in the first panel of p. 72 of <i>The Dark Knight Returns</i> . Can articulate the overall significance of the panel by referencing both the image-based and textual information and the synthesis achieved.

(2011) newly completed *ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education Draft* is another set of learning outcomes familiar to many academic librarians. Many of the outcomes can be directly tied to the process of decoding. See *Table 2: ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standard 3 – Selected Learning Outcomes with Example Student Actions*,

and *Table 3: ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standard 4 – Selected Learning Outcomes with Example Student Actions*.

The literacies outlined by Schwarz (2005, 2006, & 2007) and Jacobs (2007) and the outcomes listed in Tables 2 and 3 address only the skills and knowledge that apply directly to decoding, but decoding is just the

TABLE 2 — ACRL/IRIG VISUAL LITERACY COMPETENCY STANDARD 3 – SELECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES WITH EXAMPLE STUDENT ACTIONS	
<i>ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standard 3 – Selected Learning Outcomes</i>	<i>Example Student Action, The student can...</i>
3.1.A. Looks carefully at an image and observes details / 3.3.A. Describes the pictorial, graphic, and aesthetic elements of an image (e.g., color, composition, line, shape, contrast, repetition, style)	Evaluate a particular aspect (use of color, shading, perspective, lettering, etc.) of an image (single panel, bleed, page, cover etc.) from <i>The Left Bank Gang</i> .
3.1.B. Reads captions, metadata, and accompanying text to learn about an image	Use the text (word balloons, captions, etc.) accompanying the first panel of p. 102 of <i>Watchmen</i> to inform their interpretation of the image.
3.1.D. Examines the relationships of images to each other, and uses related images to inform interpretation	Examine the panels on p. 57 of <i>Shortcomings</i> and describe how Tomine uses closure to depict the passage of time.
3.2.A. Describes cultural and historical factors relevant to the production of an image (e.g., time period, geography, economic conditions, political structures, social practices)	Identify conventions commonly employed in Japanese manga and explain how knowledge of these conventions can influence a reader's interpretation of <i>A Drifting Life</i> .
3.2.B. Examines the purpose and meaning of an image in its original context	Explain the significance of the last panel of <i>From Hell</i> in relation to the rest of the text.
3.2.D. Explores representations of gender, ethnicity, and other cultural identifiers in images	Evaluate the use of animals to represent ethnic groups in <i>Maus</i> .
3.4.C. Informs analysis with discipline-specific perspectives and approaches	Apply the theory of transition types found in <i>Understanding Comics</i> to a page from <i>Solanin</i> and create a chart of the transitions observed.

tip of the iceberg of possible information literacy skills that can be addressed through the medium. When integrated into a course or library instruction, graphic novels can provide students opportunities to learn and demonstrate a wide range of information literacy and research skills.

APPLICATIONS

Graphic novels are researchable and can be analyzed and evaluated just like any other source of information. Non-fiction titles

can be used to create especially robust educational experiences for students. Because these titles deal with real-life events, and provide potentially valuable information, issues related to their authority, bias, methods of presentation, and intended purpose and audience present special challenges for students and educators.

The example assignments and activities listed in the next section include additional performance indicators, beyond those related to decoding, to consider when

TABLE 3 — ACRL/IRIG VISUAL LITERACY COMPETENCY STANDARD 4 – SELECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES WITH EXAMPLE STUDENT ACTIONS	
<i>ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standard 4 – Selected Learning Outcomes</i>	<i>Example Student Action, The student can...</i>
4.1.A. Articulates and applies aesthetic criteria for evaluating images (e.g., use of color, composition, line, shape contrast, repetition, style)	Identify an artistic device used in vol. 1 of <i>Oldboy</i> , and explain how the artist uses that device in the context of a single page.
4.2.A. Evaluates how effectively an image achieves a specific purpose	Describe the use of iconic abstraction in <i>Bone</i> , and explain the effect Smith’s choices have on a reader’s ability to identify with Phoney Bone.
4.2.B. Evaluates the use of visual signs, symbols, and conventions to convey meaning	Explain how Otomo uses speed lines and panel size in <i>Akira</i> to convey motion and velocity.
4.2.C. Assesses the appropriateness and impact of the visual message for the intended audience	Speculate on the intended impact of the full panel bleed on p. 31 of <i>The Photographer</i> on the reader. Describe their reaction to it and explore any differences or similarities to alternative interpretations.
4.3.B. Uses observation of visual content to evaluate textual information	Explain how the visual information provided in the image of the last panel of <i>Oh, What a Wonderful World</i> , and vol. 1 informs their understanding of the last sentence in the text box at the bottom of the page.

working with graphic novels. The performance indicators listed are intended to be illustrative rather than prescriptive. Choices as to which learning outcomes to focus on should be made locally.

• ***Finding Reviews (Review of Reviews)***

(ACRL Performance Indicators: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.2, 3.4, 5.2, 5.3)

Students work with the instructor and librarian to identify and articulate the components and characteristics of scholarly and popular reviews. Students choose a graphic novel and locate one scholarly and one popular review for the title in question. Students write a review of the reviews, evaluating each review's ability to fulfill the identified components and characteristics. Students can be asked to reflect on the process of finding reviews, the tools and resources used to do so, or the suitability of different types of reviews for different situations.

• ***Annotated Bibliography & Research Log***

(ACRL Performance Indicators: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 5.2, 5.3)

With the assistance of the instructor and librarian, students identify a particular graphic novel, genre of graphic novel, or an aspect (creator, character, theme, adaptation) of a particular graphic novel to research. Students develop a research question and identify keywords, synonyms, and possible subject terms related to the title or topic. Students work

with the instructor and librarian to identify potential sources of information and search tools. Students plan a search strategy, execute the strategy, and document the results of the strategy using a research log. The results of the search are presented in the form of a bibliography. Students can be further challenged to create annotations for items in the bibliography, and can work with the instructor and librarian to identify the components of an annotation and strategies for evaluating sources of information.

• ***Fact Checking (Briefing)***

(ACRL Performance Indicators: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.1, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 4.1, 4.3, 5.2, 5.3)

Students identify a non-fiction graphic novel to fact-check, depending on the length of the title in question, a particular chapter or page range may be more appropriate. Students identify the main ideas, facts, data, and other verifiable information from the title or selection to be researched. Students then plan and execute a search strategy to find sources that confirm or contradict the identified pieces information. Students use the information located in the search to construct a short briefing on the veracity of the information presented in the graphic novel. The briefing can be oral or written. Scope will likely be an issue, so consultation with an instructor or librarian is especially important for beginning students.

• ***Translation (A Given Source)***

Into Graphic Novel Format
(ACRL Performance Indicators:
1.2, 3.1, 3.3, 4.1, 4.3)

Students select or are assigned a short article or excerpt relevant to the subject of the course. Students analyze the article or excerpt to identify main ideas and key information. Students are asked to translate the information from the article or excerpt into the medium of comics. Students could be challenged to explain their choices regarding a variety of factors including: criteria used to select the main ideas and important information from the source material, the intended audiences of the original material and the translation, the point of view of the original material and the point of view used in the translation, the use of comic-specific devices and mechanics in the translation, the use of visual elements not specific to comics in the translation, the strengths and weaknesses of the original source and the translation as sources of information, etc.

• ***Research Paper***
(Performance Indicators vary with scale.)

Any graphic novel is a perfectly acceptable context from which to develop a research question and write a paper. Paper requirements can easily be scaled to a level appropriate to the learning environment in question. A number of additional activities and assignments such as proposals, research logs, annotated bibliographies, first drafts, peer-

evaluation workshops, rubric creation, and presentations can be included as needed.

• ***Comparison (Side-by-Side)***
(ACRL Performance Indicators:
2.5, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3)

Students select a graphic novel that has been adapted into a film (there are many to choose from: *Watchmen*, *Sin City*, *Persepolis*, etc.), and a particular scene or segment of the film on which to focus. As detailed analysis is the goal, the scenes or segments should be very short. Students evaluate the difference between the source and the adaptation in terms of factors such as “camera” distance, pacing, dialogue, use of color and lighting/shading, etc. More important than these criteria are the students’ interpretations of the impact that the differences have on the reader or viewer. To present their findings to the class, students could choose from a number of options, including the creation of a short video using side-by-side comparisons with narration outlining the factors being analyzed or an in-class presentation highlighting the same elements. Depending on the class in question, students could be further challenged to create an alternative adaptation, either a short video or live performance, and explain their choices with regard to specific aspects.

• ***Source Evaluation (Hearing/Debate)***
(ACRL Performance Indicators:
1.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.5)

Students are placed into teams (pro/con) and assigned a graphic novel (non-fiction titles are best). Teams read and evaluate the graphic novel as a source of information for a specific purpose determined by the instructor. A class assignment would work well. Students present evidence for and against the suitability of the title in question to a panel of their peers. Use of information outside of the text itself can be allowed at the discretion of the instructor. In addition, students can be encouraged to write a short report outlining their findings. The hearing should be followed up with a debriefing and class discussion to explore fully both sides and the considerations that should be taken into account.

There are certainly many other possibilities. How graphic novels should be utilized in any particular instance should be determined by the factors of the instructional situation in question. Fortunately, 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, and this variety includes both breadth and depth. Both high and low order skills can be introduced, and as shown above, performance indicators from every standard are represented to varying degrees.

CHALLENGES

Because of their variety and versatility, graphic novels can be used in many different instructional settings, but finding opportunities to do so can be challenging. It would be very difficult to integrate graphic novels into a one-shot instruction

session in a meaningful way. The best opportunities to use graphic novels to their full potential are likely to arise through collaborations with faculty. Faculty members who are already using graphic novels in their courses are the most obvious place to start. Highlighting the potential research and information literacy learning opportunities inherent in graphic novels may be useful in generating ways to collaborate by creating new or modifying previously existing assignments and activities. Targeting faculty with an interest in graphic novels, but little experience with the medium, is another possibility. By assisting with the identification and incorporation of texts appropriate to a particular class, librarians also create opportunities to work with faculty to identify and integrate learning outcomes, instruction, and assessments. There are other options. Graphic novels can serve as the texts for for-credit information literacy or research skills courses or first-year seminars that some librarians are called on to teach or co-teach. In these situations, graphic novels have a great deal of promise.

CONCLUSION

In summary, there are many ways for librarians to employ graphic novels in their efforts to improve teaching and learning. The characteristics of graphic novels invite students to develop key critical thinking and information literacy skills and to challenge their pre-existing notions of the value of non-traditional sources of information. Integrating graphic novels into classrooms and curricula can not only be a means to address key skills and concepts but also an opportunity to introduce students to a medium that is almost always refreshing and enjoyable.

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