Meeting the Demand

In 2010 we presented “Graphic Novels on Campus: Academic Outreach to the K-12 Community” at the American Library Association Annual Conference. At the time, we had just started to promote graphic novels and comics in our collections and collaborated with one professor. Since then, our collaboration has grown to involve many faculty members in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education (CISE). Requests for instruction on graphic novels increased in the fall following our poster, thanks to several factors, including increased visibility from one of the CISE heads with whom we had worked previously and the new “College and Career Readiness Standards” (what most colloquially have called “Common Core”) being developed by the Mississippi Department of Education.

Our first graphic novel session that fall was presented to several sections of Middle Level Literacy I, a class focused on teaching literacy for upper elementary and middle school grades. Sessions for Teaching Children’s Literature at the Elementary and Middle Levels (with a focus on lower grades) followed. In both of those courses, students are asked to select their own texts to read. The reading is different in Teaching Adolescent Literature and the presentation is adjusted as a result; students are pre-assigned a text, and in past semesters has included Gene Luen Yang’s American Born Chinese, Sid Jacobson’s The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation, and the Guy Sims’ adaptation of Monster by Walter Dean Myers (in a pairing exercise with the original text). Our instruction has extended to professional development for current teachers; we were invited to conduct presentations to the grant-funded SSILTT (Science and Social Studies Integration with Literacy and Technology for Teachers) Institute in 2014 and 2015.

As our graphic novel instruction developed, we also adjusted to organizational changes in our library, one of which came to our advantage; the relocation of our Juvenile Collection.

Class Content

We begin with a question; what is a graphic novel? After some discussion we land on “sequential art narrative,” and use Scott McCloud’s picker analogy (l.) of the “artform...known as comics [as] a vessel” (6). We discuss Eisner’s “grammar of Sequential Art” (8) and show how icons, panels, and gutters combine to tell a story, or establish a mood. In a class exercise, we show simple icons (r.) and ask students for their interpretation; they often respond with speaking, thinking, idea, cursing, etc.

We then tackle the myths and misconceptions of the graphic novel format: 1. They are more than picture books. Graphic novels aren’t necessarily easier to read, they just read differently, requiring textual and visual literacy. They can help in developing deductive reasoning abilities, illustrate literary devices, and benefit several of Gardner’s multiple intelligences. In a related activity, we project one of Andy Runyon’s Owly comics (r.), known to be non-textual; we ask students to tell the story in their own words, based solely on icons, facial expressions, etc.

2. They aren’t just for kids, and aren’t just superheroes. Some graphic novels are indeed graphic, making them the most challenging books in libraries. But the graphics also make for a powerful narrative, leading to many winning awards. Establishing the narrative and literary merit of these works creates one more myth to tackle:

3. They can only be used for language arts classes. This is a misconception even among open-minded students who are familiar with graphic novels. Here we show how comics are used in the humanities, the social sciences, STEM, foreign language learning, and ESL instruction. We also demonstrate searches in our Online Catalog before taking them to visit the ERC. Our new-and-improved Graphic Novels and Comics LibGuide (l.) can be a post-class resource all year long. Included in the LibGuide is a link to NovelList, where students can browse Recommended Read lists and read-alikes or search by Leslie and AR. Students working in Mississippi after graduation still have access to NovelList via the MAGNOLIA statewide consortium (r.).

Feedback from Students and Professors

“Through your instruction, many of my students were able to experience graphic novels for the first time. The overview of graphic novels was informative for the students and for me. We were then able to engage with reading graphic novels with more understanding. Your instruction also helped students to understand the academic relevance of graphic novels to the classroom. Several of my students became avid readers of graphic novels. They also loved the informational graphic novels. I learned how to present and teach graphic novels through your presentations as well.” - Manya Chappell, CISE Instructor

“Students in the undergraduate classes, as well as the in-service teachers involved in the summer institute [SSILTT], all share that they enjoyed your session and learned quite a bit. They came away better understanding what a graphic text is, that there are various types of graphic texts, and that you can use them in different ways...the students were interested and happy with the discussion, and they said they learned a lot that they didn’t know.” - Dr. Kathleen Alley, Assistant Professor, CISE

Works Cited


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