

Adolescents and “Autographics”: Reading and Writing Coming-of-Age Graphic Novels

Reading and writing graphic novels can be motivating for struggling students and reluctant readers, and can also support development of the multimodal literacy skills needed for school and workplace success in the 21st century.

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On the first day of a project that explored reading and writing coming-of-age novels, a grade 11 student in a workplace preparation English class declared openly (and somewhat proudly) that he had “never finished a novel in [his] life.” By the end of the project, he had not only read a graphic novel but also created an eight-panel graphic narrative of his own.

In this article, we examine how literacy skills develop and how image, text, and sound (in text) converge to make meaning for adolescents when reading and writing/creating multimodal sequential art panels in the style of graphic novels.

Two Case Study Programs

In this project, we worked with a total of 12 adolescents, ages 15 to 17, in two different programs at separate locations. Using video, photo, and other material artifacts from classroom sessions; semistructured interviews with selected students; and field journals, we conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the classroom-based learning.

Our first case study focused on six male students in a grade 11 workplace preparation English class at a secondary school east of Toronto, Canada. These students spent approximately six weeks of class time reading two coming-of-age graphic novels—Rabagliati’s *Paul Has a Summer Job* and Tamaki and Tamaki’s *Skim*—and creating a series of their own sequential art panels.

The second case involved six different students, males and females, in a multigrade alternative program—an academic psychosocial program for expelled students—at a facility east of Toronto. Over six weeks, these students worked on a media arts unit that began with a focus on visual literacy and included reading a variety of graphic novels. Their unit culminated in the creation of sequential art panels that told the story of a turning point in their lives or the event that landed them in the alternative program.

The students in both case studies generally perceive themselves as not good at reading or writing; that they do not like to read and are reluctant to

even try. Previously, these students had experienced failure and frustration while engaging with traditional literacy activities. It is common for such students to lack motivation.

Why Graphic Novels

The development of multimodal literacies has become essential for young people's success in school and beyond. As the National Council of Teachers of English's (2005) Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies indicates, today's students are exposed to and engaged in multimodal literacies every day. With this exposure to "the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (New London Group, 1996, para. 11), multiliteracies skills are ever more important.

Research suggests that students meet with greater success when offered a wider range of texts and activities that suit their individual needs (Alvermann, 2001; Boyd, 2002; Ivey, 1999). With their popular culture appeal, graphic novels provide a unique way of enticing at-risk students into reading, writing, and developing multiliteracies skills.

Furthermore, graphic novels and sequential art are among the many modes with which students engage at home and at school; our research project moved beyond language alone to include the juxtaposition of images and words in creating new meanings. Visual modes of communication are often more powerful than words and are now moving into the realm of nonexperts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argued that "not being 'visually literate' will begin to attract social sanctions. 'Visual literacy' will begin to be a matter of survival, especially in the workplace" (p. 3).

Given this trend, the inclusion of visual literacy in the classroom seems increasingly important. Graphic novels, comic books, and sequential art illustrate this shift from the traditional "reading path of the text" and the linear path of "reading the world as told" to the more interactive path of "reading the world as shown" (Kress, 2003, p. 50). In the graphic novel format, the visual, textual, and spatial elements work together to create the sound effects and gestures that give deeper meaning to the narratives being told.

As children grow up, they are inundated with visual modes of communication. Kress (2003) argued that the dominant site of texts is now the screen, and that the screen is the site of the visual, such as the image. As a result, this new multimodal landscape will make the "work of reading, and the demands made of readers...different and greater" (p. 166). The nature of graphic novels—with frames around moments in the story and the interconnectedness of the text with the image—fits into the definition of new media. It is reminiscent of screenplays and film.

What makes the graphic novel format different from film (other than the obvious: one moves and the other is static) is that the reader is better able to pause and reflect or to move backward and forward in the text. It is also different in its juxtaposition of words and images and in the use of words as part of the image.

In this article, we explore how at-risk youths engage with this new literacy through reading coming-of-age graphic novels and then writing what Whitlock (2006) called *autographics*, which highlights the conjunctions of visual and verbal text. In our project, adolescents are positioned as storytellers of personal learning and growth who are given opportunities to experience narrative reconstruction as they reflect on their lives, their learning, their choices, their past experiences, and their goals for the future (Hull, 2003).

As Hull (2003) pointed out, "the ability to render one's world as changeable and oneself as an agent able to direct that change is integrally linked to acts of self-representation through writing" (p. 232). When students are given opportunities to share their identity texts with peers, family, teachers, and the general public through media, they are likely to make gains in self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of community belonging through positive feedback (Cummins, Brown, & Sayers, 2007).

Comber and Kamler (2005), in their work with at-risk students and their teachers in Australia, documented the ways that teachers used technology and popular culture to reengage their students in literacy learning. They coined the term *turn-around pedagogies* to "evoke the kind of pedagogic, curriculum and people work required for connecting and reconnecting students with literacy" (p. 7). They called for the development of further research, including case studies

such as these, to provide in-depth investigations of student learning.

Setting Up the Two Case Studies

Readers of all abilities and ages read comic books and graphic novels. Comics, manga, graphic novels, and the like traditionally have not been seen as educational material. Although comics and graphic novels can provide an extra hook in the classroom, they can do more: The pictures can help visual learners as well as emergent and reluctant readers make sense of the story being told, and fewer words make them less intimidating to read than a novel full of only printed words. This simple appearance is deceptive; the stories told in many graphic novels are just as complex and thought-provoking as any traditional text. As well, the skills in multiliteracies that students are required to develop are complex and continually evolving.

The focus of the workplace preparation English class is on the development of literacy, communication, and critical and creative thinking skills necessary for success in the workplace and in daily life. Janette and Alyson worked with Victor (this classroom's teacher) to introduce the unit with a discussion of the characteristics of the graphic novel—both textual and visual—with plenty of concrete examples.

Although all the boys were familiar with the format, most of them had very limited experience with graphic novels. The student who had bragged of never reading a novel asked how the graphic novels should be read. Before we could respond to his question, one of his peers explained the format and how to follow the panels.

At this point, the students were at least mildly interested. The class was divided into two groups of three, and each group was given a different graphic novel to read. Both books are growing in popularity: *Skim* was nominated for a Governor General's Literacy Award in 2008, and *Paul Has a Summer Job* is used in high school and university classrooms across Canada (Hughes & King, 2010).

We decided to use a literature circle approach to the readings. The students read segments of their novel independently and then joined their peers for discussion around character, theme, and language. The response to this approach ranged from reluctance

to outright resistance. A practical problem was that the graphic novel format does not lend itself to reading aloud. With reading abilities all over the map, we had a difficult time keeping students focused on the same sections of text, thus undermining the different roles students had in the literature circle.

Janette and Peggy (teacher for the alternative program) took a different approach for the students in the alternative program. Instead of using literature circles to have the students read selections we chose, we brought in a variety of graphic novels: in addition to *Skim* and *Paul Has a Summer Job*, we included Spiegelman's *Maus*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Miller's *300*—which the students recognized from the movie of the same name—and a large cross-section of manga.

The students browsed through the collection, settled on a book, and read independently. Once they had spent some time with the graphic novels, they did a scavenger hunt of sorts in which they identified key visual and textual features of graphic novels, such as splash pages, types of panels (i.e., overlapping, floating, full-page), word balloons, captions, location of action, depth of field, and point of view. At the end of this session, we were pleased to note that several of the students borrowed graphic novels (often a sequel to one they had read in class) to read at home.

Creating Graphic Narratives

After each group of students finished reading at least one graphic novel, our attention turned to the production of personal stories told in the graphic novel format. As the New London Group (1996) pointed out, “meaning-making is an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules” (para. 42). Having students create their own graphic novels, of any length, is useful in helping them to develop multiliteracies skills. As Morrison, Bryan, and Chilciet (2002) argued, when students create

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sequential art such as comics or graphic novel panels, they are engaging in literacy exploration. Students learn to focus on the key moments of their stories, using succinct and dramatic vocabulary, dialogue, and gestural or nonverbal communication.

Following the New London Group's (1996) multiliteracies framework, which emphasized the importance of students as producers or designers of text, we gave the students the tools they needed to create their own graphic text sequences. They were asked to create a short sequence of images and words to depict a significant moment in their own lives using the software program ComicLife. The workplace preparation English students focused on a coming-of-age moment, while the alternative program students were directed to write about how they came to be in the program. The students became more engaged in the project when they were given the opportunity to create their own stories using images and text.

Janette brought in laptops loaded with ComicLife software for the students to use. This eliminated the need to rely on the schools' computer labs and appealed to the students. Even though the students in the alternative program were less computer savvy than the workplace preparation English students, all were drawn in by the professional results that the software allowed. With both groups, the students took more pride in their graphic novel sequences than in their other work.

Figure 1 Author Mariko Tamaki Visits the Class



Photo by Janette Hughes

Students in the workplace preparation English class did a simple warm-up writing activity during which the class brainstormed possible stories for their own eight-frame graphic novel, selected one, and then wrote about it. Victor joined in the writing as a way of modeling the activity. The students' efforts were only marginally successful in spite of our constant efforts to encourage, advise, and cajole when the need arose. Although they completed the task, which was atypical for some of them, they were not especially motivated to add much detail.

Neither group of students felt confident about their artistic abilities. They were particularly reticent about drawing human figures, which they felt were much more difficult than scenery. Because their stories were related to their own lives, drawing human figures was something they could not avoid. To alleviate some of their concerns, we did a minilesson on abstracting images through cartooning (McCloud, 1993). We explored how we could strip an image down to its basic and simple meaning to create a more abstract and universal image. Students were given the choice of using found images or taking their own photographs. The ComicLife program allows students to easily import photographs, scanned drawings, and other images. Although digital cameras were available, none of the students used them.

While the workplace preparation English students were engaged in the creation process, we were fortunate to be able to bring in Mariko Tamaki, the author of *Skim*, to talk to the class (see Figure 1). Her visit was a highlight for the students, and it inspired the class. Mariko was confident and relaxed, and she displayed a real ability to connect with teenagers. She talked to them about the process of writing a graphic novel and, using a slideshow, explained how the visuals are done first as “pencils,” then as “inks” before they are finalized.

Unlike *Skim*—which was written first with dialogue and brief descriptions of settings only, as a play might be, and then sent directly for illustrating—the graphic novel that Mariko was working on at the time she visited our classroom involved more of a back-and-forth process between her (as the author) and the illustrator.

Students' Graphic Novels

Despite the fact that two students did not complete the required number of pages and panels, we were pleased with many aspects of the project. We were impressed with the eagerness of and the positive engagement demonstrated by the students. Students who were having attendance problems began to arrive on time and ran from the bus stop to ensure they would not be late. In this section, we focus on the work of six of the students and offer some of our observations about the literacy skills each developed through the project.

Will

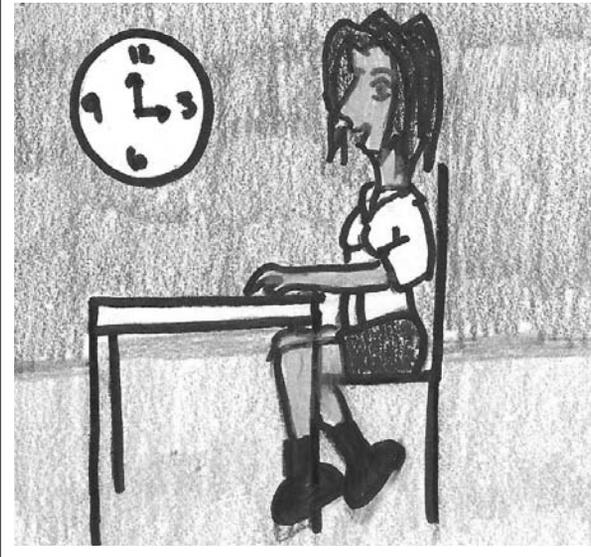
Surprisingly, the workplace preparation English student who put in the most consistent effort and appeared to be the most engaged was also the student with the lowest mark in the class. Will (all student names are pseudonyms) typically needed to be pushed to complete work and did only the minimum amount required. He did not see himself as a competent reader or writer and was the weakest in the group in terms of his facility with written language. In this project, he also felt hampered by his lack of artistic skills.

In spite of his perception of himself, Will was the first to finish his project. His story focused on a shooting that occurred outside of his Toronto apartment building when he was approximately 8 years old.

Will used found images for the visuals in his story. In some panels, Will allowed the images to speak for themselves, while other panels incorporated text using both thought and speech bubbles. He played with some of the images to make them more abstract, which helped to create an emotional impact. The panels used long-range shots and close-ups, as well as full panel images and overlapping images.

Will's use of a variety of techniques demonstrates an understanding of multimodal literacies and an ability to use them effectively. Will worked quietly by himself on his panels; however, he did share his screen with his classmates or the adults who checked in with him periodically. The event retold in his panels was a turning point in his family's history, and he recounted how it was the catalyst for his family's move out of the Toronto area.

Figure 2 Darra's Self-Portrait



Darra

Like Will, Darra (in the alternative program) lacked confidence in her ability to draw. She struggled to represent the story of her expulsion without having to draw people. Initially, she played with the idea of using goldfish in a bowl and drew a number of pictures, none of which satisfied her. After experimenting with and agonizing over her work, Darra adapted pictures from the Internet. She printed out and colored black-and-white line drawings and reluctantly drew the images she could not find online to fill in the gaps of her story.

Using a sequence of 12 hybrid images and sparse dialogue and captions, Darra successfully recounted her story, "Expulsion." The story moved quickly through the events leading up to Darra's expulsion. It is interesting that she depicted herself as an attentive student in class waiting for the bell to ring at the end of the day (see Figure 2)—a depiction incongruent with her past behavior in school. In the next sequence, Darra confronted a girl for an offense that was never explained in the narrative; in fact, the girl protested, "I never did anything...." Despite this protest of innocence, Darra fought with the girl after school.

At this point, Darra slowed the passage of time and depicted herself waiting outside the principal's office through a series of three images or, rather, one image shown from three different angles. The

sequence effectively halted the narrative and demonstrated Darra's anxiety as she awaited her fate.

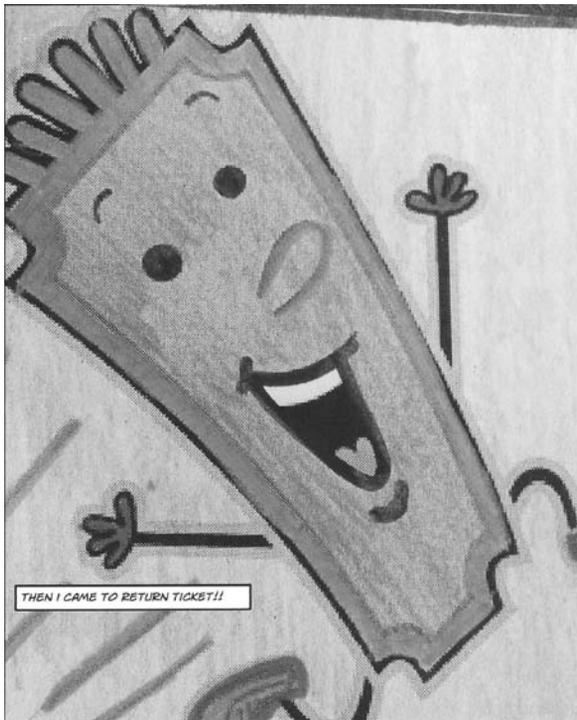
The final two panels (see Figures 3 and 4) do not need a lot of explication. It is clear by the way Darra

Figure 3 Darra's Image of Authority



Original copyright: Steve Greenberg (www.greenberg-art.com)

Figure 4 Cheerful Alternative Program Icon



juxtaposes the image of the principal, all mouth and anger, with a cheerful cartoon representation of the alternative program, which was known as a “return ticket” program. Like most of the students in the alternative program, Darra did not want to return to “regular school.” She enjoyed success in this small class environment where a group of consistent, caring adults worked closely with her.

Alyssa

Darra's classmate, Alyssa—an artistic, imaginative, and articulate student whose out-of-school issues and poor attendance keep her from experiencing success in mainstream school—took a different approach to avoid drawing “real” people. She decided to represent the people in her story using raindrops. Despite her simplification of the human form, Alyssa's visuals are effective, as she played with depth of field, point of view (see Figures 5, 6, and 7), facial expressions (nervousness), and body language (shaking knees and wringing hands). She used an establishing shot to introduce her story, “Camping Scared,” which was about being frightened by a stranger while camping with a friend. The two friends stuck together and support each other through the experience and become closer as a result.

Tyler

Tyler, a student in the workplace preparation English class, had a higher comfort level with drawing and art. Tyler was a quiet student who was frequently absent at the beginning of the project, and he wrestled with what story to tell. He decided to share a moment in his relationship with a girl he had recently broken up with. This breakup was the catalyst that he needed to finish the project; by the end, Tyler had rediscovered his love of drawing and was keen to finish the project. His story was a romantic one, which displayed a sensitive side, and he resisted calling it his own until it was complete.

Tyler drew all his images by hand, and then scanned them. At first, Tyler focused on drawing detailed images. By the end, his drawings were more suggestive, and he was willing to reuse images or parts of them. He imported the images into ComicLife and added text, using both thought and speech bubbles.

Figure 5 Alyssa's Simple but Effective Expressions

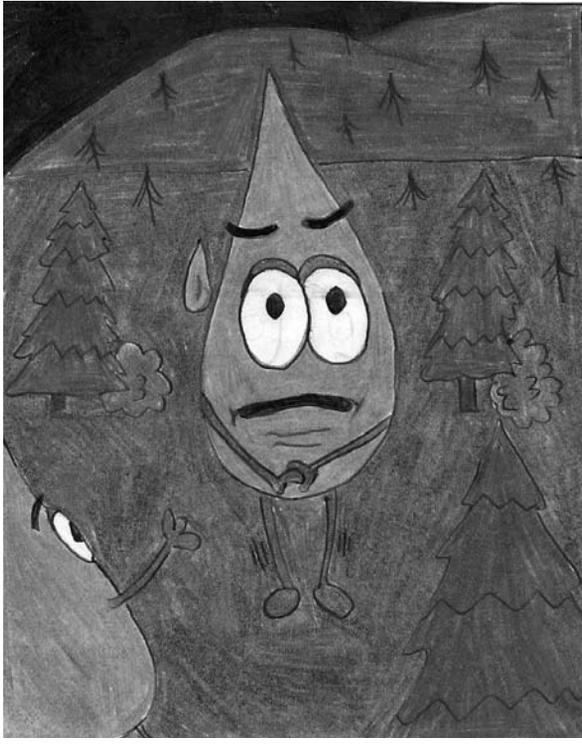


Figure 6 Alyssa's Experimentation With Perspective

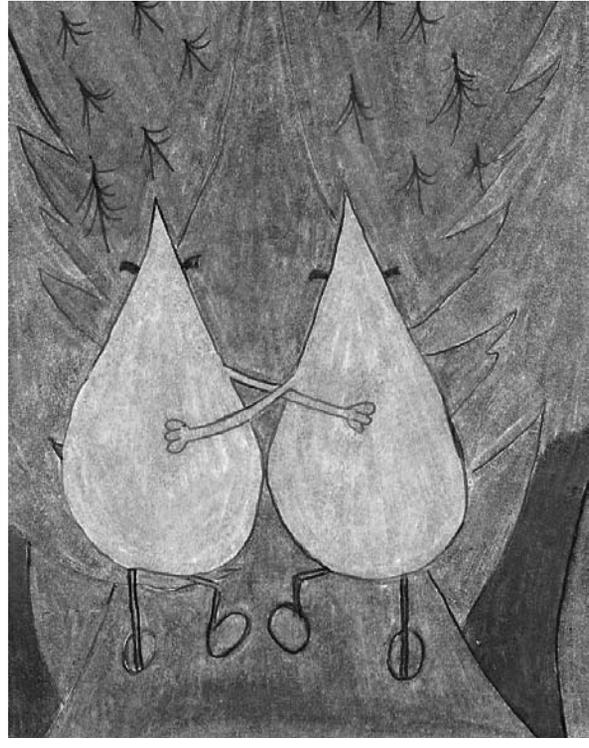


Figure 7 Alyssa's Establishing Shot

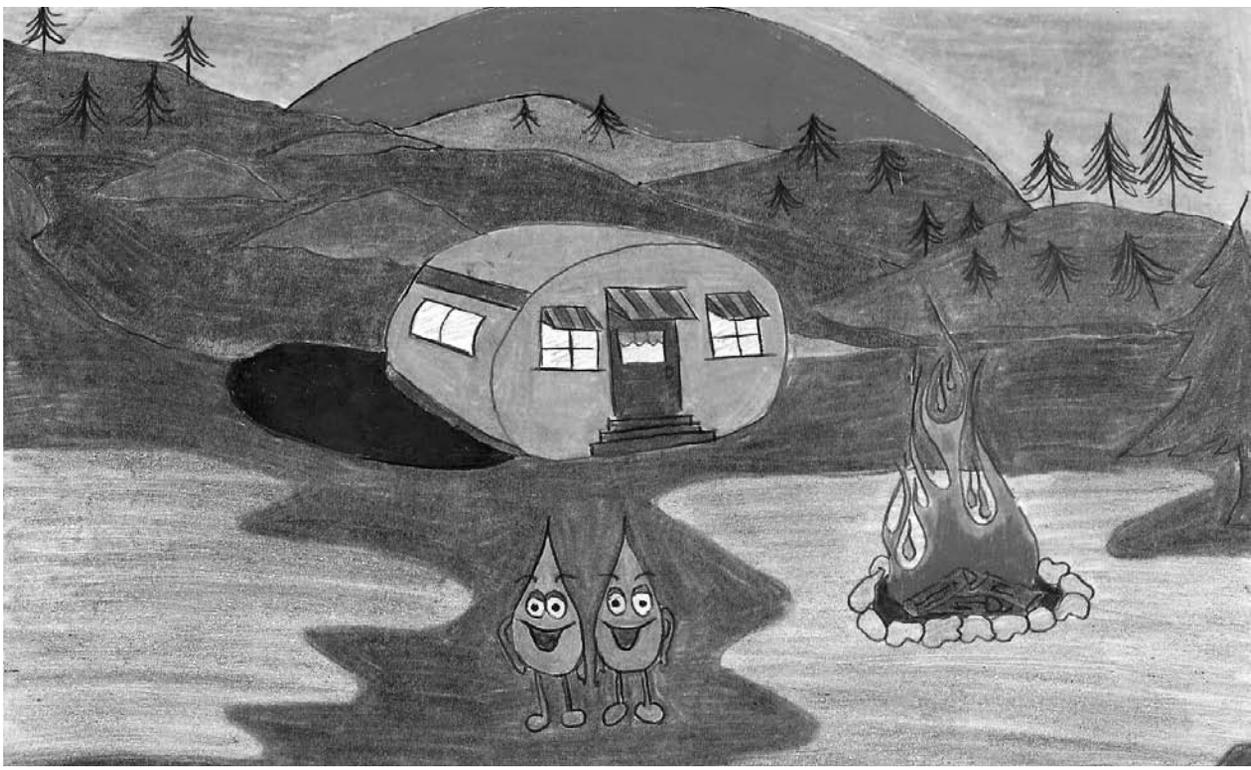


Figure 8 Tyler's Opening Sequence



Tyler used a variety of techniques (see Figure 8), including a full-page image with close-ups as inset squares and a wavering speech bubble to indicate nervousness. He used color to highlight special parts of the drawing and captions for things like creating suspense in the story. Tyler was pleased with the final product and proudly took ownership of his story, despite the fact that he risked displaying a vulnerability not typical within this group.

Mark

Mark, an identified student, was artistic, but he typically put minimal effort into projects and assignments. He was emotional and was distracted easily. He also lacked confidence in his abilities, had poor facility with written work in particular, and struggled with reading.

Mark wrote about a romantic relationship and tried to distance himself from it. He created a tender collection of images depicting the story of how a boy had his heart broken by a girl he really cared about (see Figure 9). Although Mark's drawings were remarkable, he was not as successful in creating an engaging narrative. Using eight full-page panels, Mark's story took the form of an illustrated book rather than a graphic novel. He used third-person narration in caption boxes to tell his story, but he did not include any dialogue. In his concluding panel, Mark wrote,

This graphic novel is about a boy that gives out too much love right away to this girl that he was after for a long time and she ends up breaking his heart and he learns you should never give out that much love that quick.

Mark's use of third-person narration and his reluctance to claim the story as his own, at least on paper/screen, created distance between himself and the subject of his story and perhaps signified the depth of personal hurt he experienced.

Claire

Claire, also artistically talented, was the only student in both groups who depicted someone else's story—but a story that had a profound impact on her life nonetheless. Claire created the most comprehensive graphic novel sequences both textually and visually,

Figure 9 Mark's Image of a Boy With a Broken Heart

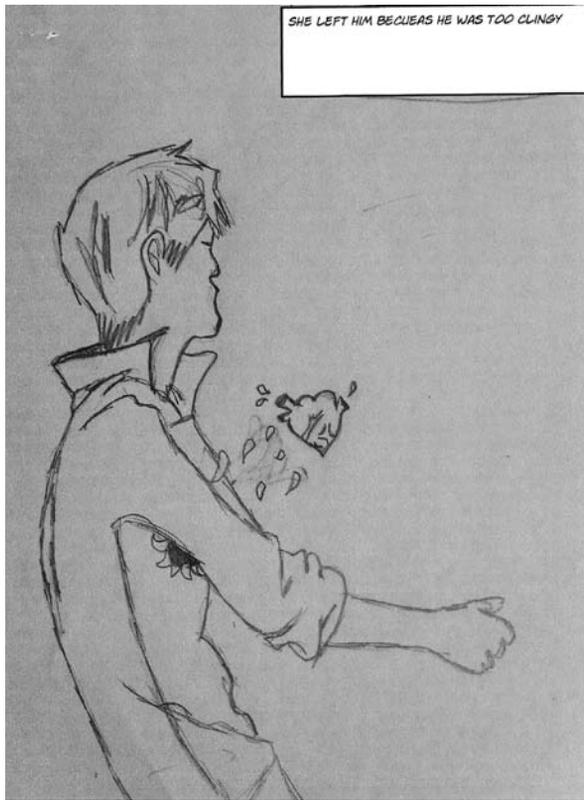


Figure 10 Claire's Splash Page



which was not surprising given her strong reading and writing skills and her ability to express herself through her artwork. She used 22 panels to tell the story of her friend who committed suicide because she “was tortured by her own demons” that relentlessly told her to “give up” and that she was “worthless.”

With the exception of the splash page, which is in color (see Figure 10), Claire used pencil and ink to draw her images. The predominance of black, white, and gray, and in particular her use of shading, added to the dark mood of the story. Her close-up drawings of eyes and parts of a man's face, juxtaposed with images of her main character's anxiety (e.g., head in hands, smoking, and the central image of her trying to escape), effectively depicted her torment (see Figure 11).

Equally strong was Claire's use of textual features, such as word balloons and caption boxes. She incorporated cloud balloons to express the protagonist's gnawing thoughts, whisper balloons to convey the persistent voices of the demons that try to control her, and jagged balloons to articulate the anger and frustration she felt as she tried to fight the voices.

Figure 11 A Character's Torment



The process of creating this story was cathartic for Claire. As she worked, she shared her story with her peers and with us, and she dedicated her work to her friend by including her photograph and a short poem:

She was a tortured soul
She wanted out
She was full of sorrow
And full of doubt
She wanted to be happy
She wanted relief
She is now soaring
She is now free.

Implications for Literacy Learning

Although the number of books and articles on the classroom use of graphic novels and comics is increasing (cf. Abel & Madden, 2008; Bitz, 2006, 2009; Carter, 2007; Cary, 2004; Christensen, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Gallo & Weiner, 2004; Schwarz, 2006; Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009), only a few have evaluated the impact on students'

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multiliteracies. Given the proliferation of visual modes of communication generally and the growing use of graphic novels in the classroom, more research is needed.

The findings of these two case studies illustrate that the reading and writing of graphic novels can be used by teachers to engage reluctant students while developing the multimodal literacy skills needed for success in the 21st century. Our small groups of struggling students were engaged by both the published graphic novels they read and the process of producing thoughtful and insightful commentaries

on their lives. Their work showed an awareness of and connections to the space around them, whether it was a constructed space like an apartment block or a natural one such as Tyler's snow scenes or Alyssa's campground.

The juxtapositions of violence with spaces that should be safe, such as one's apartment, the playground, and the school yard, brought to light the students' own awareness of the world around them. The project allowed the students to reflect on an event that had an impact on and relevance to their lives. Tyler's story showed a tender and romantic side to a boy who is physically large and potentially intimidating. Claire's black, white, and gray images conveyed the moodiness and depression felt by many teens.

Although our project is different because it involved in-class rather than after-school activities, we found, like Bitz (2009), the students demonstrated that "creative thinking and academic improvement are not mutually exclusive" (p. 41). Our students honed the conventional literacy skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking by creating comics, but beyond this they developed multimodal literacy skills by combining image and print text to make meaning.

In our project, the stories created by the students demonstrate the effectiveness of having students create and write new media, as well as consume it. The creation of such texts using images and words is a form of performative communication, allowing reluctant students to explore alternative ways of expressing their feelings and thoughts.

Once the students had been taught how to use the software and the ways in which different types of images could be incorporated into their stories, they plunged in and, for the most part, successfully created stories of which they were proud. The students needed little instruction in terms of the textual features and media concepts. As the students learned the terminology for the techniques they were using, the idea that communicating through image and text is valid was affirmed. Although many of these students floundered when it came to writing traditional stories, they were able to see the quality of their work and experience success.

Limitations to the Project

Although we had some success working with graphic novels, there were limitations. Graphic novels do not lend themselves to read-alouds, which limits the ability to read through the stories as a group. Moreover, students who lack confidence are not eager to take on parts and read aloud with others. The process of reading the books was also hampered because the students read at different paces; one student was finished well before some others had reached the halfway point.

When it came time to draft their own stories, some students were at first hindered by their perceived lack of artistic skills. The found images worked fairly well, but it was time-consuming for the students to find suitable images to represent their stories. Another limitation was that some students chose to write stories they were not particularly connected to and, as a result, they produced short sequences of panels.

Students' Success Through Graphic Novels

In spite of the challenges, these students, who would actively resist traditional writing assignments of any length, were able to develop their own stories about their lives in meaningful ways. Rather than the work being a chore (as written assignments are frequently considered to be by reluctant students), it was evident that the students found the work to be exciting and playful. It was also challenging for students as they worked to combine words and images to produce deep stories.

These students, who often struggle with traditional forms of writing, were more motivated and

engaged by the use of the comic book format and laptops in the classroom. The students showed personal growth in their stories and developed multimodal literacy skills by communicating that growth in images and text, demonstrating an understanding of characterization, setting, and space, and developing artistic techniques.

Through the reading of published coming-of-age stories and the creation of their own, the students learned to analyze and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information. They demonstrated the ability to make connections and predictions based on both text and images. Claire's drawings, for example, illustrated how she was able to visualize the story and to make connections between her life and text. She made sense of her world through her text, which made it meaningful for her. Thus, she learned two main strategies for reading: visualizing and making connections that can be used with any text that she reads.

The nature of the graphic novel format also forced students to make inferences across the gutters (i.e., the space between the panels) as they moved from one image to the next. The task of creating their own graphic sequences required the students to visualize their story and to build a visual world for their own panels. In order for the story to work, students had to connect it with both images and text. They also had to be concise, summarizing and arranging their story into sequential panels with limited space for either text or images. Often the images were left to tell the story without words.

Although our project was lengthy in both sites, some of these literacy skills can be developed through short activities such as creating sequential art panels to explicate a passage from a play or novel, or using Bitstrips (see www.bitstrips.com) to have students share something about themselves in an online classroom community. In our experience, this nontraditional approach to storytelling proved to be effective and suggests the importance of incorporating multimodal forms of expression in our teaching to reach all of our students.

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