

Connecting Comics to Curriculum

Strategies for Grades 6–12



Karen W. Gavigan and
Mindy Tomasevich

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Foreword

As the volume you hold in your hands or are reading on a digital device shows, sequential art (comics) as an educational tool has finally come of age. For the past sixty-plus years, comics were often considered useless children's drivel with little or no value. Certainly in many educational and librarian circles they were looked down upon as being the literary equivalent of smelly trash to be discarded. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, comics were argued to be one of the causes of juvenile delinquency (similar arguments in recent years have been leveled at movies, television, video games, popular music, and the Internet). Nevertheless, there were also those forward-looking sequential art artists and writers (along with educators and librarians) who stood up to argue that perhaps the format could be used to convey content beyond the "juvenile fantasy" story. As early as 1928 with the publication of the graphic novel "prototype," *Texas History Movies*, the format has been used to convey content that enlightens as well as entertains. (Need I mention the *Classics Illustrated* series through which many a youth was exposed through the sequential art format to the basic storyline of the world's great literature? *Classics Illustrated* also produced historical and scientific comics in an attempt to provide a worthwhile alternative to other types of comics). In the last several decades, we've seen the work of folks like Larry Gonick and Patrick Reynolds, as well as the *For Beginners* and *Introducing* series, use sequential art to teach everything from world history, physics, and mathematics to the complicated ideas of notable philosophers and scientists like Stephen Hawking, Wilhelm Reich, and Michel Foucault.

Although one still might find a few naysayers who would question the validity of sequential art in the classroom, fortunately for most educators this is not an issue. A better question might be, "Just which graphic novels should we use?" So many choices exist now. It is an exciting time to be an educator who uses graphic novels in the classroom. Literally hundreds of graphic novels are published to educate as well as entertain. Thankfully, Karen W. Gavigan and Mindy Tomasevich show us in *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12*, that educators can use comics as a way to entice not only reluctant readers, but all readers.

Gavigan and Tomasevich provide a wealth of practical advice, lesson plans, and suggest selected graphic novels to teach specific content. This volume is a godsend for teachers and librarians, covering how to incorporate sequential art into every aspect of the educational experience from teaching writing, history, and the fine arts,

to social sciences as well as hard science. They don't leave out the popular form of manga or how to build up a core collection of graphic novels for students to peruse. One of the things I continually harp on is that you use both sides of your brain when reading comics (right side to interpret the sequential images and left side to interpret the narrative). Thus reading comics might actually make you smarter. I can't tell you how many people have come up to me to say that they learned to read by first reading comics. Getting young people "hooked" on comics is a great way to instill a love of reading that goes on well into adulthood. With all of the sequential-art-based movies, video games, television shows, and toys pervading popular culture, it only makes sense to incorporate graphic novels into your curriculum. Luckily, *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* shows us how to do that successfully. Did I mention this can be fun for the instructors as well? Go forth and use this volume as a guide to give your students an educational experience they will never forget!

Robert G. Weiner
Texas Tech University Library

Robert G. Weiner is associate Humanities Librarian for Texas Tech University. He is the editor of Graphic Novels in Libraries and Archives and author of Marvel Graphic Novels: An Annotated Guide. He is also on the editorial board for the Journal of Graphic Novel and Comics. While working as a public librarian, Weiner helped build an expansive graphic novel collection including designing a unique in-house cataloging system. Weiner's work with graphic novels at the public library was published in two separate articles in Texas Library Journal (2002, 2008).

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—Karen

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—Mindy

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Introduction

Whether you are a novice when it comes to graphic novels or an *otaku* (a Japanese term for people obsessed with manga), this book is for you. If you are just getting started with graphic novels, you will learn about recommended lists of titles and practical advice on using them with students in grades 6–12. In addition to definitions and the elements of graphic novels, you will find a summary of recent publishing trends, awards, and recognitions. If you are a graphic novel aficionado, you will learn how to use curriculum-based graphic novels in your library or classroom. If you are already sold on graphic novels but have administrators, teachers, patrons, and/or parents who question their merit, this book will introduce you to the growing body of research that validates their use in schools and libraries. There are suggested hands-on activities you can use to share graphic novels with teachers and students. In addition to selective lists of graphic novel titles for secondary students, you will find a bibliography of professional titles and a list of helpful websites. Whatever your level of expertise, this book will provide you with innovative ideas and standards-based lesson plans you can use in your libraries and classrooms. So get ready to discover some proven ideas for using graphic novels in your libraries and classrooms. Soon graphic novels will be leaping off of your shelves in a single bound.

Chapter 1

Comics and Curriculum: Getting Started with Graphic Novels

Imagine these scenes in a school or public library: students heading straight for the graphic novel collection, sitting on the floor and examining books they have pulled from the shelves, browsing through graphic novels at tables, and sharing titles with each other. What exactly are they doing?

- A middle school student is looking for a graphic novel biography, or collective biography, of a scientist to prepare a report for science class.
- Several middle school students are talking about the latest volumes of their favorite manga series.
- A high school boy is reading a graphic novel adaptation of *Macbeth* to help him comprehend the dialogue for his AP English Language Arts class.
- A high school girl is at the circulation desk checking out the title *Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder* (Shivack, 2007) to help her understand a classmate's struggle with bulimia.
- Two high school English Language Learner (ELL) students are examining a copy of *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation* (Hennessey and McConnell, 2008) to prepare for their next U.S. History class.

Would you like to see this type of interest in reading from middle and high school students in your library and classroom? You can, when you provide them with access to a wide variety of fiction and nonfiction graphic novel titles. However, getting your students engaged in reading graphic novels requires more than providing access. You need strategies for using graphic novels to meet your students' recreational and informational needs. You need lists of graphic novel titles and ideas for using them across the curriculum with readers who have a wide range of abilities. Finally, you need to know what type of student and patron you are serving.

Take a look around at today's adolescents. Whether texting, tweeting, listening to music, or sending photos to friends, they are making connections and processing information using both text and images. To reach these twenty-first century learners, librarians and teachers must understand and teach visual literacies in today's classrooms

and libraries. These young people have grown up in a mediasphere world filled with visual images such as the Internet, television, and video games; they eagerly embrace multimodal formats that combine visuals with text. Graphic novels use an arrangement of art, and thought and speech balloons that is familiar to today's visually literate students. They also fulfill a wide range of students' reading interests, whether it is through middle school students reading about the story of an Iranian girl's childhood in *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), students in Advanced Placement (AP) classes reading about the Holocaust via *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1992), or struggling adolescent readers enjoying the familiarity of Jeff Smith's *Bone* series. Yet, many librarians and teachers are still not comfortable including graphic novels in their libraries and classrooms. For those who are not familiar with graphic novels, an introduction to the format is provided.

Graphic Novels 101

Before you begin adding graphic novels to your library or classroom, you must first understand what they are. The following list of definitions will help you comprehend the multimodal world of graphic novels, manga, and anime.

Graphic novel—An original book-length story, either fiction or nonfiction, published in comic book style, or a collection of stories that have been published previously as individual comic books (Gorman, 2003). Graphic novel refers to a format and not a genre. All genres such as biography, science fiction, historical non-fiction, fantasy, and so on can be subjects for graphic novels.

Manga (*ma-wn-guh*)—The Japanese word for comic book. A Japanese format consisting of comic books and graphic novels, typically black-and-white, and featuring stylized characters with large, round eyes. Manga titles read from back to front and right to left. They are usually published in a series in the following gender-based categories:

- *Shôjo*—*young teenage girls*
- *Shônen*—*young teenage boys*. Although *shônen* titles are typically written for boys, they have a crossover appeal for many girls as well.

Anime (*AH-nee-may*)—An abbreviated Japanese pronunciation of "animation." Graphic novel titles are often based on anime productions. They are cartoon animations available via television broadcasts, video, and online. Anime productions are characterized by bright graphics and action-filled plots, often with Ninja, fantasy, and futuristic themes.

Sequential Art—An art form that features a series of images in a sequence to tell a story or convey information. The most common formats of sequential art are comic books, comic strips, and graphic novels.

Visual literacy—The act of making meaning, using still or moving images, through visual formats such as graphic novels, manga, anime, and so on. A visually literate person understands how images contribute to the meaning of the whole.

A great first step in learning about visual literacy is to read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (1994). McCloud's informative book, a graphic novel in itself, provides an engaging look at graphic novel elements and an overview of the format. Some of the graphic novel elements that McCloud refers to in his book are listed in the sidebar.

Yet, even with an understanding of the format, many librarians and teachers are reluctant to include graphic novel titles in their collections and lesson plans. It may be because of their own reluctance, or because of the influence of others who have discouraged the use of graphic novels in schools and libraries. To dispel any fears about using graphic novels with children and young adults, and to learn about some proven success stories, it is helpful to examine the current body of graphic novel research.

What the Research Says

To understand the importance of including graphic novels in your library collections, it is necessary to have an understanding of the body of research and theory examining their use with children and adolescents. Several years ago, there was little research regarding the use of graphic novels in schools and libraries. Fortunately, there have been a growing number of such studies in recent years. These studies can be helpful in convincing naysayers of the value of using graphic novels with diverse populations of students. For example, some studies have shown that graphic novels can motivate readers to achieve reading enjoyment and success (Botzakis, 2009; Carter, 2007; Hammond, 2009; Monnin, 2008). There are many educators and theorists who believe that graphic novels can help make the curriculum more relevant for our students (Alvermann and Xu, 2003; Schwarz, 2002; Xu, Sawyer, and Zunich, 2005). Additional studies have examined the use of graphic novels with specific populations of students.

Boys and Male Adolescents

Reports on achievement scores in the United States consistently indicate that boys are being outperformed by girls in the area of reading (Tyre, 2006). In the 1990s, the

Elements of Graphic Novels

Bleed—text and illustrations that run to the edge of a page

Captions—contain information about a scene or a character, and are generally used to establish the time and setting of a story

Gutters—the space between borders

Motion Lines—motion lines, or action lines, refer to the abstract lines that appear behind a moving object or person to make them look like they are moving quickly

Panels—squares or rectangles that contain text and illustrations from a single scene

Panel frames—the border or edges of a panel

Sound effects—presented within balloons, usually in all capital letters

Speech bubbles, or word balloons—the balloon that represents the speech of a character spoken aloud

Symbolia—iconic representations used within comics and cartooning. Examples include the use of a light bulb over a character's head to indicate an idea, or the use of "zzzz" to indicate sleep.

Thought balloons—the balloon that conveys the thoughts of a character



During a lesson on sequential art, these middle school boys share their enthusiasm for graphic novels.

U.S. Department of Education estimated that “the gap in reading proficiency between males and females (favoring girls) is roughly equivalent to about one and one half years of school” for seventeen-year-old students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995). Fortunately, several studies have shown that when male readers select engaging reading materials, such as graphic novels, it can help them find their reading voices by choosing to read rather than

choosing not to read at all (Brozo, 2002; Ivey and Fisher, 2006; Krashen, 2004). For example, a study by Ujiie and Krashen (1996) examined the comic book reading of 571 seventh-graders at two California middle schools. Although half of the girls reported that they did not read comics, 83 percent of the boys indicated that they always, or sometimes, read comic books. A little over half of these comic-book readers reported that they liked to read, as opposed to 21 percent of the non-comic-book readers. In addition, in a longitudinal study of male reading habits, Smith & Wilhelm (2002) found that graphic novels were one of the few types of texts that actively engaged male readers. Similarly, a Canadian study revealed that males respond positively to images, because they are more oriented to visual/spatial learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004).

English Language Learners

Recently, graphic novel studies have focused on the use of graphic novels with English Language Learners (ELL) (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Liu, 2004; Ranker, 2007). These studies found that the high interest topics and visual support found in graphic novels were beneficial to ELL students. For example, Cary’s 2004 study demonstrated that graphic novels include authentic dialogue that can help English Language Learners comprehend everyday English.

Special Needs Students

Other recent studies have demonstrated the value of using graphic novels with special needs students (Smetana, Odelson, Burns, and Grisham, 2009; Young and Irwin, 2005). For example, Young and Irwin (2005) worked with students in special education classes to determine whether or not graphic novels can improve reading

outcomes, motivate students to read more, and enhance student achievement. They found that students could visualize text after reading graphic novels, and that some of the previous non-readers became readers once they were introduced to the graphic novel format. Similarly, Smetana et al. (2009) found that graphic novels were a valuable format for engaging failing deaf students in a remedial summer school course. The combination of text and visuals helped to scaffold the students' understanding of literacy skills.

The academic needs of struggling male readers, English Language Learners, and special needs students are an ongoing concern for librarians, teachers, and parents. Because of the documented potential for connecting these students to graphic novels, there is a growing demand for curriculum-based strategies for using graphic novels in libraries and classrooms. Given that, "A less motivated reader spends less time reading, exerts lower cognitive effort, and is less dedicated to full comprehension than a more highly motivated reader" (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000, p. 406), the popularity of graphic novels has promising implications for the reading motivation and achievement of marginalized readers.

Additional Research and Theory

Several educators and theorists have described further educational and social benefits of using graphic novels with students. For example, Burmark (2002) writes that the most compelling reason for using visuals in the classroom is that images are stored in long-term memory, which aids comprehension. Visualization is often recommended as a literacy teaching strategy, because images can be used to facilitate students' reading comprehension. The visuals in graphic novels make the text less threatening and can help to increase engagement and motivation (Gorman, 2003; Krashen, 2004; Lyga, 2004). The wide range of texts and storylines in graphic novels is appealing to students who may have difficulty reading linguistic text (Wilber, 2008). In addition, other literacy researchers have found that graphic novels can be used effectively to teach multiple literacies (Carter, 2007, Carter and Evensen, 2011; Frey and Fisher, 2008; Schwarz, 2002).

In his book, *Developing and Promoting Graphic Novel Collections*, Miller (2005, pp. 29–30) lists some of the following reasons for using graphic novels in educational settings:

1. Graphic novels can help students develop literacy and language skills by reinforcing vocabulary.
2. Graphic novels offer students a chance to explore visual literacy and develop critical thinking skills.
3. Graphic novels can present information about literature, history, and social issues in ways that appeal to reluctant readers.
4. Graphic novels provide stepping stones to full-text classics and spring boards to extra learning activities.
5. Graphic novels can inspire challenged students who lack reading confidence, reading ability, or motivation for self-guided reading.

Mitchell and George (1996) maintain that comics are effective tools for teaching gifted children about morals and ethics. Similarly, Schwarz (2002) found that an important benefit of using graphic novels is their ability to present alternative views of culture, history, and human life. For example, graphic novels can be used to address relevant social issues, such as bullying and divorce. Consider, for example, *Yummy* (Neri and Duburke, 2009), a graphic novel depicting the true story of gang-related violence in south-side Chicago.

Librarians and teachers are recognizing that one way to motivate students to read is to provide them with the ability to choose more varied and interesting reading materials, such as graphic novels. Cary (2004) found that the non-traditional, visual format of graphic novels consistently engaged readers through elements such as humor, heroes, and art. Others see the value of using graphic novels with twenty-first-century learners. In the words of Gene Yang, author of *American Born Chinese* (2006), "Comics is a multimedia medium. It is a single medium made up of two distinct media: still images and text. When students learn to read comics, and especially when they learn to create comics, they're learning this twenty-first-century skill of making decisions about information, and about media" (Standen, 2010). Other studies support the view that reading light materials, such as comics and graphic novels, is the way many reluctant readers develop a taste for reading and can lead to the reading of other, more traditional texts (Krashen, 2004). For example, Haugaard (1973) reported that her eldest son, an avid comic reader, gave his comic collection to his younger brother when he became more interested in reading the likes of "... Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury, books on electronics, and science encyclopedias" (p. 85). Furthermore, the results of a study of seventh-grade boys showed that reading comics did not inhibit other kinds of reading (Ujii and Krashen, 1996). Frey and Fisher (2004, 2008) found that the visuals in graphic novels enable students to have positive reading experiences, which makes them more likely to want to read more.

Circulation data from public and school libraries indicate that reading graphic novels can stimulate readers' interest in additional reading materials (Brenner, 2009). For instance, some libraries have reported 25 percent increases in overall collection circulation after adding graphic novels to their collections (Miller, 2005). Allison Steinberg, a school librarian in California, increased her library circulation by 50 percent after purchasing \$1,000 worth of graphic novels (*Curriculum Review*, 2004).

Publishing Trends

The number of graphic novels published each year has grown exponentially in the last decade, as graphic novel publishing companies have added graphic novel lines, or imprints, to their publishing houses. Other non-comic publishers are creating graphic novel presses to meet the growing demands of today's readers. For example, Capstone launched its graphic novel division, *Graphic Libraries* in 2005. In the same year, Scholastic created its own graphic novel imprint, *Graphix*. To meet the growing demands of its readers, the publishing industry is releasing graphic novels representing a variety of genres, subjects, and social issues. As additional genres have become available, the market has responded. Overall, graphic novel sales in the United States and Canada for 2008 were \$395 million (*Publishers Weekly*, Feb. 2009). In 2007 graphic

novel sales in the United States and Canada were \$375 million, a 12% rise from 2006 and quintuple the sales number from 2001 (MacDonald, 2009). In terms of K-12 graphic novel sales, over 4 million graphic novels were sold at Scholastic Book Fairs from 2004–2007 (Reed Business Information, 2007).

Awards and Recognition

The popularity of graphic novels grew in leaps and bounds after 1992, when Art Spiegelman was awarded the Pulitzer-Prize for his comic book memoir, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. When Spiegelman received the award, it helped to establish the graphic novel's legitimacy in the literary world. The rapid growth of graphic novel publications and sales has been followed by an increasing recognition of their literary merit for all ages and on a variety of topics. For example, Judd Winick (2000) won numerous awards for *Pedro and Me*, an autobiographical graphic novel about his friendship with AIDS educator Pedro Zamora after the two met while on a reality television series. The book's awards included the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Honor Award (2001), as well as the American Library Association's Notable Children's Book Selection (2001). Later, *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) won the 2007 Michael L. Printz Award for a book that exemplifies literary excellence in young adult literature. In the book, Yang alternates three interrelated stories about the problems of young Chinese Americans trying to participate in the popular culture. The title was also on the list of the 2007 Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults (YALSA), and it was a 2006 National Book Award Finalist in the Young People's Literature Category.

In 2007, the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) created an annual list of award-winning graphic novels for adolescents, Great Graphic Novels for Teens. This annual list, of recommended graphic novels and illustrated nonfiction for adolescents, has helped to shine a spotlight on quality graphic novels for libraries and schools. Additional awards for graphic novels for adolescents include:

- 2007 Printz Honor award for *To Dance* (Siegel, 2006), an autobiographical memoir about a ballerina
- 2010 Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction for *Storm in the Barn* (Phelan, 2009), a story about the Dust Bowl
- *Yummy* (Neri and Duburke) was named the 2010 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award, 2010 ALA Notable Book, a 2010 Great Graphic Novel for Teens, and a YALSA Top Ten Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers.

Using Graphic Novels across the Curriculum

Students may become more willing to engage in reading across the curriculum when librarians and teachers allow them to use nontraditional texts, such as graphic novels, that they are motivated to read. As Gurian (2005) writes, textbooks "may not be engaging enough to keep boys (or girls) interested" (p. 140). Graphic novels can supplement textbooks and provide many learners with the support they need to comprehend course content. Furthermore, the large assortment of storylines and information represent a variety of curriculum areas, and meet the diverse reading needs of