

I love graphic novels as they offer me something different that main-stream novels just don't offer. The illustrations bring me into the action; it's like I'm right there, in the book.

...like there is this barrier... reading a novel with pictures is only for nerds, but its more then likely that these novels will encourage a passion for reading in later life.

Different texts, different times.
Allison Lee, teacher librarian at Emmanuel School, shares her thoughts about the rise and rise of graphic novels in learning and teaching.

There continues to be a great deal of curiosity about graphic novels. This is evidenced by a number of factors, of which the Hollywood film tie-ins have certainly helped. Importantly though, graphic novels are being embraced more and more by public and school libraries and notably their usage in the school curriculum is becoming more acceptable.

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In terms of academic articles, searches performed on online databases will yield many articles about graphic novels and their place in libraries, but importantly, for graphic novels to come alive in learning and teaching environments, we really need to examine models of effective teaching.

As well, we also need to be familiar with the environment that young people are growing up in. In their article, *Using student-generated comic books in the classroom*, Morrison et al [2002] suggest that, by incorporating popular culture into the curriculum, teachers can bridge the separation many students feel between their lives in and out of school.

By understanding the changing nature of communication and the interplay between literature and technology, teachers can observe young people being comfortable in environments that emphasize creativity and efficiency through the integration of graphics. And this, I believe, is where

graphic novels can act as a bridge between students' outside world and the world inside their classroom. As Strauss [2004] notes:

Students can be given the opportunity to use graphic novels in order to enhance their creative writing skills by creating their own [graphic novels].

Learning through the graphic form

Students can create fictional graphic novels either individually or collectively [see inset Visual literacy p10].

For example, they can develop a newspaper style four-panel comic strip as an introduction to a study. The technology can be as simple as using Microsoft Word and gathering pictures from the Internet or incorporating digital photographs.

More sophisticated software packages such as *Comic Life* will also provide opportunities to create realistic graphic novels by providing templates and other options.



Visual literacy—panel analysis

A simple way to use the graphic novel as a tool for developing visual literacy is to develop a lesson around panel analysis [Versaci, 2008]. Students are tasked with describing the visual and textual elements of a single panel and then hypothesizing about possible deeper meanings that may come about from an analysis of the interplay between the two. For example:

Design your own comic This could be based on stories already written in class or on stories specifically created for the comic book material. It could be a long term project in that it could be based on HSIE topics such as *Explorers* or the *Human body*, or on Science topics such as *Earth and its surroundings* or *Built environments*, incorporating both factual and fictional elements.

Produce a comic book cover... come up with own superhero or other character

Students copy, trace and adapt existing material or use drawing guide books. From there students can be encouraged to work on developing their own ideas and style.

Students can review graphic novels titles for the library and produce a written piece about the ones they liked

These can then be displayed next to the collection or collated into a guide for perusal by other students.

Design character masks

Students could design their own character mask and then act out the strip while wearing their mask. They can then be photographed in action and the subsequent images form the basis of the comic strip. This could also be adapted to a *live comic* where actual speech balloons are created on card, which the actors hold up at relevant points.

Paired reading text

Comics can be used between pupils engaged in paired reading. Older pupils can introduce these texts to younger pupils, encouraging discussion on enjoyment of this medium, ease of reading, etc.

Debating

There are many issues raised in the material above around comics, such as female and male stereotypes, that can be used as the basis of a debate within class.

These lesson ideas have been adapted from the website *Graphic novels in the curriculum*, created by Learning and Teaching Scotland @ www.ltscotland.org.uk/literacy/findresources/graphicnovels/section/practical.asp

As Amelia Courtis [2008] writes in her article about the use of *Comic Life* in the classroom, the composition of a comic can,

involve a range of skills and cognitive processes and [sic] appeals to multiple intelligences.

Creating a graphic story with *Comic Life* may involve composing and taking

photographs, creating a logical sequence of events or frames, writing, or illustrating. Students may have the option to work individually or in groups—visual learners would gain a great deal from such activities.

Moving beyond the narrative as an activity, such software can be used for other purposes such as timelines, plot summaries or

story mapping, as well as listing information/ facts [ibid, 2008].

Trial copies of these types of software allow you to use them before purchasing.

In summary, graphic novels have gained a great deal of ground, both in terms of their popularity and their range of readership in recent years. This has translated into a greater



willingness by teacher librarians to examine the format and see how it might be used to promote literacy and to enhance critical thinking skills.

Because graphic novels are a format that combines visual imagery with text to create a story, and by so doing mimicking the most common form of information we access today, it seems reasonable to include them in the range of material that we present to students in order to foster their skills of analysis.

The selection of suitable material will be an issue with the format but censoring such material depends on many variables including audience, location, cultural / religious considerations and so on.

Hence, teacher librarians should be willing to adapt their selection criteria with the goal to enhancing and broadening their collections with graphic novels.

In conclusion, I offer this gentle reminder that traditional literacy [reading and writing in print] is not sufficient in our media-dominated society [Schwartz, 2006].

More and more material is being accessed electronically through computers, mobile phones and other devices.

The type of information is also changing and developing. For example, we have witnessed the growing influence of blogs and video broadcasters such as *youtube.com*.

However, in order to comprehend this information and make observations about the current culture we need to be able to **sift and interpret effectively**.

It is this process of selection, analysis and reflection that requires us to be able to *read* multiple texts such as film, television, and the Internet [ibid, 2006], as well as photographs, paintings, billboards, graphic novels, etc.

And finally, let me leave you with this comment from Snowball, a PhD student from Perth, who writes extensively about graphic novels. She reminds us that:

You're actually reading the pictures at the same time that you're reading the words, so if you're not used to it that can be very difficult. It's something you have to learn.

It is something that **we** have to learn!

References

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The full text of Allison's paper can be found at www.aslansw.org.au/learning/2010/

The challenge for us is to enter the world of our students, engage with the world they inhabit and begin to build that graphic novel collection.

The challenge for us is to make graphic novels legitimate in learning and teaching.

~LGL