Contents

WARNING: READING COMICS IS NOT SO EASY

One of the very next things I do is address the common and incorrect assumption that reading and understanding graphic novels is simple. Teaching graphic novels to students has taught me that it is important to avoid the assumption that *all* students are familiar with reading comics merely because comics are most often associated with kids. Because of the common stereotypes surrounding comics as childish or outlandish, students sometimes feel worse for knowing little about the medium. It is therefore important to establish a baseline of students' initial understanding of comics and their level of exposure to graphic novels before studying specific texts. The last thing you want your students to feel reading these challenging and complex texts is stupid. Most of them have had enough of that already. I ask my students to answer a few basic questions that stress their personal experience and interpretation because I want them to realise right away that what they say matters and their interpretations are valued. This is the beginning of teaching students through the use graphic novels how to find their own voice.

WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS?

There are several good reasons to use graphic novels in your classroom. My reasons are based on classroom practice, observations and conversations with students, some of which have been confirmed by other educators:

- Students read graphic novels. They don't pretend to read.
- Because I can teach more graphic novel titles in the same amount of time I'd spend teaching fewer lengthier print texts, students are privy to a wide variety of stories and genres that keep them continually engaged in reading.
- Graphic novels and other shorter graphic narratives can be read in the classroom, thus I can facilitate students' application of reading strategies and clarify trouble spots for students for an enjoyable read. Students love the time I give them without distractions at home. This builds sustained attention for reading and students are less likely to quit reading a challenging text. Plus, it's social. When everyone around you is reading, it's hard not to follow the crowd. Many students find this "relaxing" and "look forward to reading in English." Those are students' words, not mine.
- Because they take less time to read, graphic novels are easier to reread for deeper comprehension, so students are more apt to expe

rience reading as a constructive, recursive process (Diamond Bookshelf, 2008).

- Reading graphic novels adds to students' reading repertoire (and my teaching repertoire).
- Students find the aesthetic experience with visuals pleasurable (as opposed to more typical anesthetic experiences associated with common types of school-based reading).
- Because of the interpretive nature of pictures, graphic novels facilitate instruction on the participatory and active, constructive nature of reading (Diamond Bookshelf, 2008; Gillenwater, 2009).
- Because images are open for interpretation, this prompts rich discussion, stimulates problem solving and builds social meaning (Gillenwater, 2010); therefore, students avoid one authoritative answer, creating a more democratic classroom (Rosenblatt, 1995).
- With graphic novels, students can learn how to handle ambiguity in a text, develop an open-minded approach to its possibilities, sustain attention, and develop other traits of competent readers (Blau, 2003).
- Students build confidence reading graphic novels, promoting further engagement with other forms of storytelling and chang[ing] negative attitudes toward reading (Panella, 2004).
- Students feel respected for getting to read books they like, in school.
- The content within graphic novels lends itself to exploration of big picture or essential questions, fostering students' personal and intellectual growth.
- The analysis of the relationship between content and form of graphic novels prompts critical thinking and is applicable to analysis of other media (Diamond Bookshelf, 2008).
- Graphic novels challenge weak and strong readers alike.
- Students must exercise more skill (reading images and text) not fewer when reading graphic novels (Gillenwater, 2010; Yannicopoulou as cited in McPherson, 2006).
- The comics medium and themes found in graphic novels are more connected to students' experiences and more personally relevant to their lives. They don't often get bored reading and give up.
- Because students are more invested and engaged in graphic novels, their writing is more interesting, authentic and passionate. This provides more opportunity to facilitate writing instruction and skill development.
- Quotable images are easier to recall and locate in text to cite when providing evidence to support analysis and interpretation.
- Critical analyses and prefabricated essays about graphic novels are not yet ubiquitous on the Internet; therefore, critical thinking, analysis, and

writing must come from students rather than from a field of "experts" from whom they might "borrow" interpretations, a common problem when teaching traditional texts or classic works of fiction.

• They are useful in meeting curriculum standards and twenty-first century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

• They are fun to teach!

PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCES

In addition to choosing engaging material, pedagogy is the other important factor in getting and keeping kids reading in school. Teachers can potentially spoil the experience of reading great stories if they try to control how students respond to them. As is evident throughout this book, my pedagogy is informed by Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory and a reader response approach to teaching literature.

Practical classroom methodologies, lesson activities, and assessments throughout this book are also influenced by the approach to literacy outlined in Sheridan Blau's *The Literature Workshop* (2003). Especially apparent in Chapters 2 and 6 are his influence on reading and writing as a recursive process, and his "marks of competent readers" (p. 210) are habits I aim to help my students practice while reading graphic novels. The seven traits include: capacity for sustained, focused attention; willingness to suspend closure; willingness to take risks; tolerance for failure; tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty; intellectual generosity; and fallibilism and metacognitive awareness (p. 211). In addition to Rosenblatt and Blau, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009), Kelly Gallagher (2004, 2009), and Jim Burke (1999, 2000, 2010) also influence my methods.

Additional resources regarding theory, methodology, and reading graphic novels are listed in the References of this book.

A WORD ABOUT ASSESSMENT

Since I subscribe to teaching that fosters student-centred, constructive learning, my primary goal in this book is to show you the *process* of learning with graphic novels. I want to show you the trial and error, epiphanies and musings and reflections of students who are reading graphic novels and constructing comics of their own. Philosophically, I believe teachers should collaborate with students to create appropriate rubrics that target specifically tailored goals for their particular population and use assessment data

to continually adjust future lesson activities and plan curriculum. This very fluid process is difficult to capture by way of generic marking guides.

My students and I co-construct rubrics, which take into consideration students' individual composition goals, and we conference often to adjust expectations, depending on the direction the composition piece takes. We discuss and attempt to visualise final products and the specific aspects assignments will include, though we are careful to allow for creativity and innovation during the composition process, otherwise students are somewhat prohibited from taking risks and using composition as discovery. It takes more time and more energy from both teacher and student to be invested in constructing differentiated rubrics, and the easy way out is to default to a less democratic approach, but I urge you and your students to determine together what an "A" looks like for the particular exercises in

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Transactional Theory

When I use the term *transactional theory*, I am referring to Louise Rosenblatt's explanation of the reading process in *Literature as Exploration* (1995) as transaction between a reader and a literary text. The reading process is "a constructive, selective process over time in a particular context" wherein "[t]he relation between reader and signs on the page proceeds in a to-and-fro spiral, in which each is continually being affected by what the other has contributed" (p. 26).

Reader Response

When I refer to my pedagogical approach as based on *reader response*, I mean that my role as teacher is to design lessons and a classroom environment that presupposes that my students' experience with a text is transactional as Rosenblatt (1995) defines it. Readers' personal, distinct responses are of primary importance in contrast to a teacher imposing his or her interpretation of a text or leading students to understand a text in one, correct, authoritative, or predetermined way.

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literacy learning you find throughout this book. The other reason specific marking guides are absent from the chapters is simply because I use a quarterly portfolio assessment system based on Sheridan Blau's method

outlined in *The Literature Workshop* (2003), wherein most marking takes place on bi-quarterly and quarterly bases.

LET THEM DRAW PICTURES

Twenty-First Century Skills

When I refer to twenty-first century skills or twenty-first century learning in this book, I am referring to the learning and innovation skills that include creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration, as well as the information, media, and technology skills outlined in the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework Definitions (2009).

You will notice throughout this book that my approach to teaching graphic novels emphasises both reading images and composing with them. When I first began teaching graphic novels, I was cautious about allowing students to draw pictures in English class because I thought it might interfere with teaching writing. I soon realised that in order for students to truly understand and appreciate comics as a storytelling and communications medium that I had to let them try their hand at composing sequential art. Students were concerned that they would be marked on their drawing skills, but I reassured them (as many graphic artists do at comics workshops) that stick-figures are perfectly acceptable, and I drew alongside them for reassurance. Once students realise they are allowed to play, they quickly enter into creative mode!

Since the world today is full of multimedia and professional presentations that typically contain visual elements, it simply makes sense to prepare students to work with images as part of their developing language skill. The various student artwork in the book and their comics research presentations posted online reveal practise using visuals to entertain, tell story, and convey information almost always for a real audience. At first, my students were afraid to draw, but I allowed them a wide range of tools to accomplish the task of creating visual narratives and many took advantage of learning new technologies, whereas others preferred to use the low-tech pencil-and-paper approach. If you plan to teach graphic novels and ask your students to draw, I recommend looking on the Internet for links to resources for illustrating and creating comics.

CHAPTER SNAPSHOTS

This book is meant to help you see the kinds of teaching and learning that occurs in a graphic novel classroom. I think of the chapters as a collection of snapshots of graphic novel lessons, activities, student discussion and composition using specific texts. You may find activities inapplicable to your particular student population, but I hope what I present prompts you to think about ways to extend, modify, supplement or inspire your own good ideas. As most teachers know, teaching is more like alchemy than an exact science, thus sharing my experiences is meant to exhibit the possibilities of what can be accomplished with graphic novels in the classroom rather than as a prescriptive set of instructions.

Each chapter in this book invites you into my classroom with student commentary, dialogue, or example work samples, followed by an overview of the graphic novel under study and its teachable topics, concepts and skills. Most chapters contain reader response activities, examples of online student commentary and a report on various classroom discussions. The material used in lessons explicated within the chapters can be found on the Internet, including additional student examples, study guides, discussion questions, quiz and test prompts, project directions, class activities, and assessments, along with links to audio and video files, author interviews, and other websites used as part of teaching units. It is not necessary to read each chapter sequentially, but it will be helpful to begin reading Part I first if you are unfamiliar with teaching visual literacy.

Chapter 1 focuses on ideas for teaching Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) where the emphasis is on fun, collaborative, constructive learning activities to teach concepts of visual literacy. Students learn a new vocabulary of the language of comics and develop criteria for evaluating comics and graphic novels as a method of effective storytelling. Through understanding the concept of closure, students realise and evaluate the role and influence of prior knowledge and experience in interpreting images and stories. They learn about making inferences, metacognition, and their role as active, constructive participants in the reading process.

In Chapter 2, students are taught to break out of the preconditioned behaviour of finding one right answer (Blau, 2003) when interpreting images from a chapter in Shaun Tan's all-graphic novel, *The Arrival* (2006). The lessons and activities show how making meaning occurs through collaboration and discussion. The second half of the chapter is a picture of students engaging in new graphic novel reading behaviour as they explore

Josh and Abbey's drawings also illustrate their understanding of closure and gutters.

Closure : The ability to complete a whole story by adding details to individually given parts.
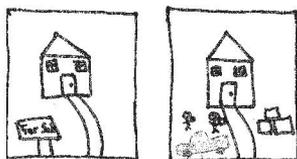
Complex Closure: The house was bought and a new family is moving in.
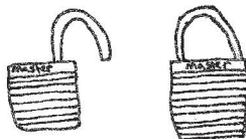
Simple closure : Someone locked it.

The gutter belongs to the reader. This is where the reader can introduce his or her own thoughts to complete the story.

Closure : the ability to connect a story between images

Gutter:

In the gutter, the reader assumes things that happen between the depicted moments. CLOSURE happens in the GUTTER.

Constructive Reading in the Gutter

The gutter is the small space between panels where the reader must make necessary assumptions about images and commit closure to gain meaning. It is important for students to be conscious of their exact contribution when they look at the space between panels while reading comics. The conscious collaboration to which McCloud refers is a tremendous opportunity for students to understand themselves as readers, thinkers and emotive human persons, including the prior knowledge and experience they bring to bear on what they see and what they do not see. It's also an opportunity to have more fun drawing! See the following student examples from a lesson reinforcing the notion of closure through drawing panel transitions.
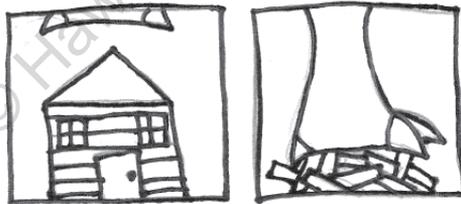
Subject to subject

Transition
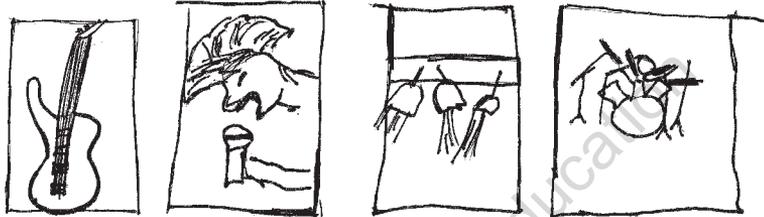
Aspect - to - Aspect

Transition: Action to Action

The final portion of the Chapter 3 lesson asks students to think about McCloud's title, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, as it relates to the idea of closure. In addition to interpreting the visible, the invisible is the portion of comics where the reader completes meaning as informed by prior knowledge and experience. Helping students become aware of their participation is the most important point of the lesson.