



Introduction

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Graphic Narratives as Teaching Tools

What do young people read these days? Comics, most teachers reply, typically with a sigh. But why the sigh? This seminar set out to undo the knee-jerk reaction that graphic narratives are inferior to books without pictures, offering lesser opportunities for reading, learning, developing critical thinking.

We worked against this assumption in two different ways. First, the Fellows in our seminar became expert readers and appreciators of graphic narratives as a genre. Combining words and images in a unique way, graphic narratives permit their creators great experimental freedoms. How many different ways can a page be divided up into panels, gutters, bubbles of dialogue? Infinitely many, it turns out—and each choice generates slightly different emotional and cognitive effects that the reader has to discover as she makes her way into a new graphic novel. To feel these aesthetic differences is easy, especially for young people used to visual stimulation. However, to describe them precisely or recreate them is much harder. Much of our work in the seminar went toward learning this practice of careful analytic description. As we encountered graphic novels from different parts of the world, intended for a wide variety of audiences, our collective appreciation for the capacities of this genre grew. We brainstormed ways in which this collective knowledge could be passed on to students, whether through creative assignments or analytic ones.

The Fellows who joined this seminar represented a wide variety of specializations. Ranging from kindergarten teachers to high school teachers, they hoped that graphic narratives would help them teach subjects as varied as art, writing, social studies, wellness, foreign languages, and science. For some of them, graphic narratives were interesting in their own right as art objects and rhetorical objects; for others, they presented new possibilities of mediating crucial pieces of information about biology, history, or sentence structure. To make room for these diverse pedagogical needs and intentions, we widely varied the content of the graphic novels with which we engaged. Beginning with classic superhero comics and children's picture books, we went on to discuss historical comics that recreated historical events; STEM comics that described the human body in fun and accessible ways; middle grade graphic novels that thematized young adolescents' struggles with mental health; and many others. On their own time, the fellows did much research to expand this initial canon of texts even further, sharing their new discoveries with each other.

The curriculum units collected in this volume reflect this wide variety of interests and specializations. Some Fellows, such as Sarah Lewand and Alima McKnight, developed units that focused on teaching students and teachers how to create their own comics. Garrick Yazzie combined this approach with teaching Navajo students how to gather oral histories of their tribal affiliations. Debra Jenkins and Lauren Freeman focused on

introducing teachers to the neuroscientific research that demonstrates graphic novels' pedagogical usefulness, suggesting groups of activities that draw on graphic novels' particular pedagogical strengths. Several of the humanities and language teachers in the group explored how graphic novels can be productively incorporated into their classrooms alongside or in place of conventional novels and art objects. Renee Patrick Mutunga developed a model for teaching Iranian history, with a focus on Western misperceptions of Iran, through the prism of the graphic novel *Persepolis*. Landon Walker juxtaposed *The Watchmen* against a selection of masks from various cultures to help his students think about masks and social identity building. Marla Colondres proposed to connect with students in a heritage Spanish language course by teaching them graphic novels that were originally written in Spanish and focused on experiences of migration. Vivian-Lee Taylor and Angela Sprigby experimented with combining conventional novels or short narratives with their graphic novel adaptations as a means of increasing student comprehension and engagement. Carol Boyton and Yasmine Collins modeled adopting graphic narratives as means of teaching grammar and biology to young students.

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