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Graphic Novels and Multimodal Literacy: A High School Study with American Born Chinese

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Meshing print literacy and visual literacy, graphic novels exemplify a type of multimodal text demanding multimodal literacy skills. The comics format of graphic novels requires the reader to know the conventions that constitute the unique language of the medium. These visual conventions are comparable to genre conventions of traditional print texts. This article discusses these conventions and relates literary theory to graphic novels. It also presents a reader response study conducted with American high school students using Gene Yang’s American Born Chinese.
In the past, literacy was defined as the ability to read and write printed text. What we now consider as “text” is much wider, encompassing all communication media. “Text” has come to mean “anything in the surrounding world of the literate person” (Carter 12). Texts can be different combinations of the modes of print, images, sound, gesture, and movement which include digital texts as well as film, music, television, drama, and print (Arizpe and Styles). Authentic literacy, by which I mean the ability to navigate the world of images and texts in which one lives, is acquired through multiple paths using multiple modalities and requires an expansion of our concept of literacy (McPherson). Think of the years children spend learning to read printed text. Now consider how much time people spend using multimodal forms of communication. If, as Gunther Kress believes, multimodality refers to “all the modes available and used in making meaning, in representation and in communication,” we should devote as much attention to acquiring multimodal literacy as we do in mastering traditional print literacy (“Literacy” 91).

One example of a multimodal text is the graphic novel, a fiction or nonfiction narrative in comic book format, sometimes referred to as sequential art. It fuses art and text, combining print literacy and visual literacy to present a multimodal literacy experience. The comic book format used in graphic novels demands a different literacy because the words and pictures are read as a single integrated text (Duncan & Smith). It might be assumed everyone knows how to read graphic novels since most people begin reading comics as children. However, the ability to read comics is learned, a skill that those who rarely read comics or comic books may not have acquired (Bennett). Readers who lack experience with this format, Robin Brenner believes, must make a number of adjustments, the main one being attending to the illustrated portion of the story. After progressing from picture books to chapter books that are primarily text, children may not consider illustrations necessary for comprehension. Stephen Cary found that illustrations in comics could be helpful to his students learning the English language, if they gave any attention to them. He discovered with his students and with teachers in his staff development workshops that they sometimes had difficulty reading pictures, or simply did not take the time to read them.

Reading graphic novels also requires slowing down and rereading, involving a high degree of cognitive engagement (Chute). The strategies for reading graphic novels differ from reading text alone. Hollis Rudiger developed a set of instructions for reading them because she contends that people do not read graphic novels simply because they lack the conventions for reading them. Rudiger’s comments refer to the
American context, where graphic novels are read with much less frequency than in other parts of the world. In my study, I drew on her ideas and conducted a small scale study to encourage the teenagers in a school library to read more graphic novels.

Graphic novels and comics share the same textual conventions, much like genre conventions, that readers need to learn to interpret. Among others, these include ways to depict motion or differentiating volume in dialogue: the former appears in the art and the latter in the text or speech balloons. Graphic novels, using the comic format, are based on the combination of verbal and visual elements, and they have their own grammar and vocabulary (Bongco). To understand graphic novels, it is crucial for the reader to be aware of the text conventions, or the formal principles, that comprise their graphic language (Versaci). Will Eisner states, “comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language” (8). In this paper I will discuss conventions of comics, relate literary theory to graphic novels, and present a graphic novel reader-response study conducted with American high school students.

Learning to Read the Visual Text of Graphic Novels

As with any language, the language of comics is always evolving. Conventions such as panels, panel borders, gutters, lettering, narration and captions, balloons, sound effects, perspective, time, and motion are standard, but the creators of comics and graphic novels challenge their readers by deviating from these standards to express unique ways of communicating. In drawing a comic, all of the above conventions must be considered as they form the rules or the reader’s internalized grammar of the literature. Without this knowledge of the rules, or of the literary conventions, literature would not be intelligible as literature (Culler). For the comics and graphic novel reader, knowledge of the conventions is necessary for literacy.

A reader approaches a text already understanding the structure of certain genres or literary forms, and how they work; some of this knowledge is acquired prior to entering formal school settings. Most children know the basics of fairy tale conventions, including the traditional fairy tale, beginning with “Once upon a time” and ending with “And they lived happily ever after,” which means they have a general sense of linear chronology and plot development, even though they lack the terminology to describe this knowledge. Other literacy conventions are taught in school.

Kress believes it is sensible to teach conventions for egalitarian purposes because students come to school with different backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, and cultural resources, so they do not always know genre conventions (Kress, “Literacy”). Those who are more knowledgeable about a variety of text conventions may respond differently to texts than those who are less knowledgeable (Beach). One convention that needs to be learned, for example, is how to read the gutters.

Comics present visual fragments, omitting more visual information than they include (Wolk). Reading graphic novels is a process requiring attention to the interplay of the written and visual, and it also involves responding to something which has not been depicted within the encapsulated moments of the sequential panels. There are gaps between panels called gutters, and understanding what happens in the gutters is generally referred to as reading between the panels.

Wolfgang Iser presents a theory of gap-filling that explains how readers fill in the unwritten parts of a text. Iser’s theory refers to traditional text, but his ideas are very apt for discussing the literal gaps between frames in a graphic novel. A reader interprets a text by constructing a gestalt shaped by the constraints of the text symbols. The
unwritten parts of the text, the gaps, are filled in by the reader who makes decisions about what to include or eliminate based on past experience, social and cultural factors, and knowledge of text conventions. Iser refers to this reader as the Implied Reader who is predisposed to interpret the text in an expected way or is shaped by the text. However, Iser also recognized the Actual Reader who, due to his or her background and experiences, may not fill in the gaps of the text or make meaning as the author intended. The Actual Reader has some freedom in the gap-filling process and this freedom accounts for variability in text interpretation.

Graphic novels have more pronounced gaps than written text, gaps you can see in the gutters between panels. Since the panels fracture the flow of the narrative into the sequenced segments that alternate with the blank spaces of the gutters, “comics as a form requires a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation” (Chute 460). The value of understanding the meaning-making process of reading graphic novels adds to the research in multiple literacies.

The kind of literacy required for comprehending graphic novels is essential for success in our multimedia world, because the skills employed while reading in the comic format transfer to other multimodal forms including television and film, the Internet, and video games (Brenner). Dale Jacobs states:

By examining comics as multimodal texts and reading comics as an exercise of multiliteracies or multimodal literacies, we can shed light not only on the literate practices that surround comics in particular but also on the literate practices that surround all multimodal texts and the ways in which engagement with such texts can and should affect our pedagogies. (183)

There has been much scholarly interest in the multiliteracies framework, but little classroom-based research has been grounded in multiliteracy, especially in the United States (Chandler-Olcott). The research that is available on comics or graphic novels includes articles about the history and critical analyses of the works of various authors/artists. Graphic novels around the world were the focus of *Bookbird* (49.4) which featured scholarship about the history and use of graphic novels in Iran, India, and Korea, and also included articles examining the work of Shaun Tan, Raymond Briggs, and Dave McKean.

Early studies of the use of comics in education were positive. After World War II, American comics expanded to genres other than the superhero, and public opinion of comics changed for the worse. Comic book reading declined during the 1950s when the comic book industry suffered censure from the United States Congress (Hajdu). However, comics did not go away entirely, and the graphic novel evolved in the 1970s. Recent studies about using graphic novels in the classroom support the fact that they can be used to motivate reluctant readers and aid comprehension for less skilled readers who may have had difficulty transitioning from picture books to print only text. More and more, educators at all levels are reporting their increasing use, which suggests a need to understand students’ responses to graphic novels (Carter; Versaci). In an attempt to contribute to our knowledge of how students respond to graphic novels, I devised a study that examined how high school students responded to *American Born Chinese* (Yang). Scholarship in comics is an international and multidisciplinary field of study, which draws from fields of film theory, literary theory, cultural studies, art, history, psychology, as well as education (Duncan & Smith; Hatfield). Reader response theory, which combines pedagogy with literary theory, provided the framework for this study, particularly Louise Rosenblatt’s theory of transactional analysis.

Rosenblatt focused attention on the reader’s experience or engagement with the text. She defined reading as a transaction in a particular context between the reader and the text as a two-way process. Since each reader has a unique background that includes social, ethnic, and psychological history, she did not believe in a
generic reader or a single correct reading. In the transaction between the reader and the text, the reader constructs meaning. She described the transaction as a “to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text” (xvi). Like Rosenblatt, Charles Hatfield describes reading comics as an active interpreting, a “tug-of-war” that demands intense reader involvement with the text. Scott McCloud refers to the reader as “a willing and conscious collaborator” who has to participate or work to construct meaning from comics (65). The reader cannot simply read the text in a linear fashion and disregard the images. Images must sometimes be studied to understand the narrative, as the text does not make sense without the images.

High School Reading Habits: An Empirical Study
As a high school librarian, I noticed circulation statistics increased as the graphic novel collection expanded. Superhero and manga titles were the most popular, but the art or independent graphic novels, fiction or nonfiction in various genres with perhaps more literary quality based on traditional print criteria, were not being checked out by students. Cynthia Lewis and Jessica Dockter state that graphic novels with more literary quality may not appeal to students as much as manga or the ones they exchange among themselves. With this knowledge, I wanted to investigate how students would respond to an art graphic novel, even though they were not as popular. I wanted to introduce students to this form of literature and possibly help them develop an appreciation for art graphic novels.

*American Born Chinese* by Gene Wang is an art graphic novel which won the American Library Association’s 2007 Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in young adult literature. The story is about Jin Wang, a Chinese-American teen who seeks acceptance from his peers. It was selected because it includes issues of American immigration, culture, racial identity, and stereotyping that integrated well with the curriculum of the political science course.

To determine whether students’ knowledge of comic conventions involving multimodal literacy skills would affect their responses to a graphic novel, I conducted a study with 23 senior Political Science students in the high school where I worked as a librarian (Hammond). The school, with a student population of approximately 1500, is located in a large suburban metropolitan area in Midwestern United States. I also sought to determine whether students recognized serious issues when presented in comic book format. Even though graphic novels are considered on par with great literature in France, and their ubiquity in Japan causes readers to turn to them as a release from busy lives (much like the relationship that Americans have with television), comic books in the United States are generally thought to be humorous, inconsequential literature for children, if considered
literature at all (Brenner). Due to their comic format, graphic novels have also suffered from this stigmatization.

First the students read *American Born Chinese* and wrote responses to prompts at three designated intervals. During a book discussion, their oral responses were recorded. This was followed by a lesson about the history of comics and about their conventions. During the lesson, terminology such as “splash panel,” “bleed,” and various speech balloon outlines from www.teachingcomics.org were presented and discussed. Then students completed a reading survey about graphic novels and about their reading of *American Born Chinese*. Students read *American Born Chinese* a second time responding just once upon completion. Finally, a small group of students participated in a focus group interview, and a few students opted to create their own comics. The students’ comments are quoted verbatim and used with permission.

“Why are we reading a comic book?”

Students responded to *American Born Chinese* in much the same way that students respond to text novels, using similar critical analysis skills. They responded to literary elements such as plot, theme, and characters, and noted foreshadowing and denouement. Paula Griffith provides criteria for evaluating the format, illustrations, and content of graphic novels and claims that “good graphic novels contain all the literary elements we expect for quality fiction and nonfiction” (184). Examples of her criteria include determining whether the gutters aid comprehension or distract the reader, examining the illustrations for clues to character emotion, mood, and personality, considering whether the characters are three-dimensional, and whether the denouement resolves the preceding narrative events.

One student recognized foreshadowing in the panel in which the herbalist’s wife told Jin Wang he could be anything he wished, provided he was willing to forfeit his soul. This student explained, “I guess the fact that it became like dark and the words were bolded [i.e. in bold face], it felt like it was more important….You’re like, that’s going to be important because of how they present it.” This student responded to the text and the images indicating that the graphic novel afforded a vehicle to demonstrate both print and visual literacy skills.

Only thirty percent of the class had ever read a graphic novel before the study. When asked what they knew about graphic novels prior to participating in the study, one girl responded, “Absolutely nothing.” Initially, she thought it meant books with lots of action, sex, and violence. She later admitted that she had seen graphic novels before, but she did not know what they were called. The term “graphic novel” was new to many students. Based on circulation statistics, graphic novels were popular in my library, but they were popular with only a small percentage of students.

Another student questioned why they were being asked to read a comic book. When observed reading *American Born Chinese* by someone
outside of the classroom, the student was asked, “Reading a comic? Seriously?” This student explained that it was called a graphic novel and the response was, “Right.” While the professional literature indicates that graphic novels are hugely popular, they are not popular with all students, and many students have never read one. From the reaction of the students both in and out of the study, it would seem that the comic format is a deterrent for some American students.

Comic Conventions
Given the students’ lack of experience with graphic novels, one might have expected them to have difficulties comprehending American Born Chinese. This was not the case, however. Brenner believes teenagers can instinctively read graphic novels, even if they have never read one before because, from an early age, they are used to media that separates and integrates text and images in various ways: “Today’s students…are immersed in a multimodal culture, learning about their world from more than just prose sources” (Duncan & Smith, 279). The complexity of the cognitive task of reading a graphic novel did not translate into difficulty.

It was not determined whether students knew particular comic conventions before they began reading American Born Chinese, but it is safe to assume they knew many comic conventions from exposure to them in the media (Yannicopoulou). This was demonstrated in their written responses to the prompts that sought to determine their comprehension of the story during their first reading. In response to the prompt that asked them to examine pages 100-105 and explain what was happening, one student wrote that Wei-Chen and Amelia got locked in a closet: “You can tell this by the click sound effect the author adds, the dialogue, and that they’re waiting awhile because the clocks had different times.”

After the discussion and lesson about comic conventions, students were taught specific terminology associated with comics, and so became more aware of the conventions being used in American Born Chinese during their second readings, which was noted in their final written responses. One student had not realized the difference between a thought balloon with a cloud-like outline and a speech balloon with a solid outline. Another student reported that although she assumed the characters were whispering while in the movie theater, during the second reading she noticed the speech balloon had a broken outline to indicate whispering. Still another student noted how volume was depicted. He wrote, “I also noticed how text seemed to get bigger when the voice of the character was raised.” It would appear that the lesson about comic conventions made students more aware of the techniques of graphic artists and increased their comprehension and visual literacy.

There are benefits to any rereading, and although some of the students were reluctant to read the book again, most admitted that they understood the story better after a second reading. Due to the lesson on comic conventions, the students claimed that they paid closer attention to the images, noticing more details, including facial expressions and characters’ emotions. Many students reported that they changed their reading method the second time they read the graphic novel.

Many students reported that they changed their reading method the second time they read the graphic novel. One student wrote, “I really think my method of reading changed when I totally understood how these novels worked.” Another student had been confused about the order of the panels during her first reading. After her second reading she wrote, “Once I found out how to go through graphic novels, it just started to flow, with occasional stops to look at the images more closely.”

While using a variety of reading methods, all the students reported reading both text and
pictures. Students realized that their reading required multitasking and the use of multimodal literacy skills, and the majority of them believed that it was the combination of text and image that helped them gain the most meaning from the story. They recognized that the text and images worked in combination with each other because they both shared narrative responsibility. The integration of two modes with two separate literacies required a new literacy, a multimodal literacy, for making meaning (Kress, “Literacy”; Siegel).

**Creating Comics of Their Own**
Knowledge of comic conventions did appear to have an effect on the number of conventions used when creating comics. One student who created an optional comic for the study did so before the lesson on comic conventions. In the questionnaire at the start of the study, he had indicated that he had never read a graphic novel before. His comic, entitled “Prom Night,” has static panels with no transitions and, although he employed dialogue balloons, he incorporated few comic conventions.

Another student who read manga occasionally, created her comic “Time” after the lesson on comic conventions. She included a variety of comic conventions such as the use of the clock to depict the passage of time, speed lines, and sound effects. When questioned about her use of comic conventions, she responded that she got her ideas from the *Comics Terminology* web page discussed in class during the lesson, and she deliberately tried to incorporate them into her comic. The comic she created was more sophisticated and complex indicating that knowledge of comic conventions aids in both understanding and communicating in multimodal texts.

Students are motivated by the possibilities multimodal communication affords (Lewis & Dockter). Those who create their own comics feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as Michael Bitz discovered in his Comic Book Project in which urban youth wrote and drew comics about their personal lives and interests. It began in New York City and later branched out to several other U.S. cities. In the United Kingdom, students in a south Yorkshire high school with literacy levels below the national average created a 132-page graphic novel with the aid of professionals (Ritchie). The project boosted student literacy and confidence.

Overall, students in the study were pleasantly surprised at how much they liked *American Born Chinese*. They judged it “a good book” and expressed a desire to read more art graphic novels. Students in the focus group confirmed that graphic novels were not popular with the general student population, but they believed they would gain in popularity as their familiarity
The project boosted student literacy and confidence.

grew, which would help erase the stigma attached to reading comics. The students also recognized that serious issues could be presented in comic book form. One student wrote that at first he did not take *American Born Chinese* seriously because it was a comic book. “But after I read it, I found it profound and there were topics that I could relate to...that made you choose sides.”

Graphic novels are capable of presenting serious issues, and students felt that they could be included in the school curriculum. Making connections to the curriculum is not difficult with the variety and volume of graphic novels published each year. In his *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels*, James B. Carter presents ideas for implementing over 100 graphic novels in the secondary classroom. In Germany, a history textbook about the Holocaust written in comic format was introduced into the curriculum (Kimmelman). The intimacy and immediacy of the medium facilitates a better understanding of a serious subject and encourages adolescents to talk more openly about it.

Evidence indicates that teenagers often prefer multimodal texts (Moje). The ability of students to read different modes simultaneously is a sociocultural practice not defined as standard in school literacy and offers some students more opportunities for success (Siegel). Educators need to broaden their understanding of literacy beyond print text. Some forms of multimodal texts such as film and electronic resources have been embraced in schools, yet the vast majority of teachers are still reluctant to introduce comics and graphic novels into the classroom (Duncan & Smith). Perhaps these teachers question the literary value of graphic novels, or it could be they are uncomfortable with the multimodality of the format. Graphic novels are a relatively new medium, at least in American high schools, but Brenner predicts they will become as ubiquitous and accepted as any other medium, as they have already spread across platforms to be accessed digitally. Schools need to reflect the wide range of multimodal literacy practices in which students engage. As a multimodal text, graphic novels help students develop the skills necessary to thrive and be fully literate in the 21st century.

**Acknowledgments**


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