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Talking to Teachers about Reading and Teaching with Comics: Pedagogical Manifestations of Curiosity and Humility

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Abstract

This paper explores how English teachers are currently using comics in their classrooms, and how they describe the problems and benefits of working with this curious textual form. As an educational researcher, I am interested in how the experimental ethos of comics can influence classroom practice in a similarly experimental fashion, and it was with this open question that I decided to ask fifteen high school English teachers how they teach with comics, and whether and how they feel their teaching practice and classroom environment has been affected and enlivened by the inclusion of these texts. In organizing this paper, I proceed as follows: I describe my own preoccupations; I provide a short description of the technical elements of comics reading; I describe how teachers open their studies, and consider the teaching strategies that they employ; and lastly, I discuss their rationales for using this particular art form.

Introduction

Occupying one of the fastest growing segments of the publishing industry (NPD Group, 2017), comics and graphic novels are now more frequently appearing as reading choices for younger and older students alike. However, while many secondary teachers may see these books in their department's book collection with a mix of relief, excitement, and happiness, others may feel the opposite, experiencing something closer to a troubling sense of distrust, worry, and unease. Since comics are an elusive and slippery textual form, with much that is hidden between what is said and what is not, this discomfort is not surprising. The question for these teachers is: How do we teach these texts? And secondly: How do we read them (especially when encountered in the institutional contexts of school)?

Though many of us may have been reading comics from an early age, many others have not had any experience with these texts at all, a fact that is just as true for students as it is for teachers. Given this potential lack of exposure, and even though comics are often viewed erroneously as a simpler kind of literature, many teachers may be hesitant to teach these texts (Lapp et al., 2012), and many students may be too nervous to learn how to read a new kind of narrative, or to even take such stories seriously. On the other hand, there are certain students for whom such texts are *too familiar*, and who resent or disregard the need to read such stories slowly and in detail. Responding to these difficulties, this paper explores how high school English teachers in two major cities in Alberta, Canada, are currently using comics in their classrooms, and how they describe the problems and benefits of working with this curious textual form.

In the context of pedagogical spaces—schools, classrooms, and other kinds of learning environments—comics have often been viewed by arbiters of literary and aesthetic value with a hesitant and ambivalent sort of gaze. They have been let in the door, surely, but how far and for how long is a question up for debate. Despite their relatively recent ascendance in literary circles (for instance, Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina* was on the 2018 longlist for the Man Booker Prize, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize back in 1992) and their prominent position in this “media historical moment” (Orbán, 2013, p. 8), comics have historically been treated as no more than a lowbrow genre and a simple distraction. Similarly, in literacy education, such texts have often been presented as a tool for struggling readers and not much else. Indeed, as comics theorist Hilary Chute (2008) notes, comics were “once considered pure junk” (p. 452), eminently and inevitably disposable, no closer to literature and accepted forms of visual art than a grocery store flyer. In recent years, however, there has been a growing enthusiasm across a number of diverse fields and disciplines (Boerman-Cornell, 2015; Dallacqua, 2018; Jimenez & Meyer, 2015; Kim et al., 2017), including education, that comics might actually offer multiple opportunities for sophisticated literary engagement across all educational levels, and for readers of all abilities, ages, and persuasions. Following

this logic, many contemporary theorists and teachers of reading, writing, and other forms of composition have argued that the multimodal and often indeterminate structure of comics allows for an interpretive freedom unparalleled in most traditional, word-based texts (Cromer & Clark, 2007). Moreover, since they push forward in time using words and images, across gaps in space and meaning, comics allow readers to draw and create connections from what they do see just as much as from what they do not.

This, at least, is the conviction of those who champion the study of comics, and given that I find myself in this group, I often wonder how such texts can be used in the classroom in new and different ways. I also wonder how literacy pedagogy itself (*how* we work with students to produce, recognize, and reorganize meaning in reading and writing experience, as well as with other kinds of representational structures) can be reimagined with the entrance of this unconventional textual form. In short, I'm curious how the experimental ethos of comics, which Maguire (2013) explicitly describes in relation to a "history of resistance and boundary-pushing" (p. 57), can influence classroom practice in a similarly experimental fashion. It is with this open question that I decided to ask a number of high school English teachers how they teach with comics, and whether and how they feel their teaching practice and classroom environment has been affected and enlivened by the inclusion of these texts. Before I introduce these teachers, however, and describe their various perspectives on and suggestions for teaching with comics, I'll briefly explain my own position, and why I believe that the modes of reading and inquiry that comics offer are especially important to the situation of contemporary education, which as Kimberly Lenters (2016) notes, is "set within a web of competing notions of what counts as literacy and how students should perform it" (p. 281). For those who may be new to this art form, I will also provide a short description of some of the technical elements of comics reading.

Positioning my own preoccupations as a researcher

Though it may be still overwhelmingly assessed and standardized along these lines, literacy is no longer always defined by an individual's autonomous and intentional practices of reading, writing, speaking, and representing. Indeed, in contemporary contexts of meaning making, social and virtual relationships often position the individual as part of larger, forever-shifting networks, where the linguistic is only one of the countless forms of potential expression, which also include such possibilities as movement, spatial design, digital text, posture, image, dress, gesture, sound, performance, etc. As American cognitive scientist and comics theorist Neil Cohn (2016) tells us, "humans communicate through different modalities—whether through speech, bodily movements, or drawings—and can combine these expressive capacities together in rich and complex ways" (p. 304). As such, literacy is also no longer only determined by that which can be seen and readily externalized in end products (such as the essay, the drawing, the poem, the movie, the speech, the podcast, etc.), but also by that

which may be *in process* and on the way to something else, and which therefore cannot be spoken, captured, or traced with absolute certainty. As opposed to a focus on design and future stability, contemporary conceptualizations—including Kuby and Rucker’s (2015) poststructural model of process and *literacy desiring*—allow participants in literacy events to concentrate “on the intra-actions of people-with-materials, -movements, and -surprises while creating, not necessarily a future end product” (p. 315). In their consideration of literacy as something fluid, emergent and unpredictable, Gail Boldt and Kevin Leander (2017) focus on “signs of newness ... the push and pull of movements as they register on our sensing bodies” (p. 413). As an example of how such “push and pull” may relate to classroom life, Lenters (2016) argues that despite their appearance as a kind of unnecessary diversion, “seemingly off-task multimodal” events may also provide important insight into the situation of “contemporary literacy learning and instruction” (p. 2). Think of the student who draws a world of doodles instead of writing, or the one who taps their fingers softly on her desk while they are reading, or another staring at the branches blowing in the wind outside of the classroom window, and how the very tangential nature of these activities may be somehow indicative of something to do with literacy learning. In the contemporary conversation, then, ways of being and becoming subjects of literacy that may have once been considered periphery and oppositional are now regarded as potential sites of individual and collective meaning making.

Along these same lines, my own theoretical preoccupations have mostly focused on psychoanalytic understandings of reading experience (Lewkowich, 2015a, 2019a; Lewkowich & Jacobs, 2019), emphasizing the importance of the reader’s unconscious life. This inner life includes all that happens inside the reader’s mind while reading, the memories that appear and disappear, the feelings that flow in and out of awareness, strange reverberations that invariably affect our reading bodies. In my analysis of how the reader’s unconscious finds expression in language and other forms of articulation, I have turned to various psychoanalytic conceptualizations of the dream to articulate the unpredictable and interminable dialectic between conscious and unconscious life in reading experience (Lewkowich, 2015b, 2015c, 2018; Lewkowich & Pasiaka, 2017). Even though these unconscious effects may themselves remain inexpressible, I thus wonder how the “seemingly off-task” emotional lives of comics readers are nonetheless essential to how they make sense of what is happening on the page. In reading comics, I therefore argue, a reader’s emotional life is just as crucial and inescapable as the words and images that an author uses to structure their graphic story. Without the reader to insert their understanding in the space between the panels (a space that is called the “gutter”), or between the characters in dialogue with one another, comics can often remain an incomplete narrative of unconnected moments. Across these gaps, which are sometimes “as much a part of the story as the frames themselves” (Chute, 2011, p. 285), readers are provoked to make connections as they guess at that which

they cannot otherwise see. In such guessing (which often happens unconsciously and without explicit reflection), readers rely on all they are (their memories, emotions, relations, past experiences, and beliefs) to construct a thread of narrative sense.

As an example of that which adult readers bring to their experiences of comics reading, in my recent work with preservice teachers I have explored the possibilities of visual representation as a mode of reader response, asking readers to illustrate a memory experienced while reading a graphic novel, no matter how fleeting, tangential, or seemingly unconnected to the text in question (Lewkowich, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d). As readers discuss their images with other readers, I have found that the image itself becomes a kind of refraction of memory, text, and reader. The text is always somehow about the reader, as the visualized memory is always in some ways about the text. This visual practice thus allows readers to work through and at the limits of what can and cannot be expressed through language and representation, maneuvering between the past and present, and between word and image. Similarly, in my classroom work with preservice teachers, I implore these readers to consciously consider the function of a comics page as a surface that has no single entrance. In so doing, readers focus not only on the formal features of the text, but also on the ways that plot and form interact with memory and desire in the uncertain creation of textual meaning. All this is to say that, in questioning *how* comics can be studied, and in my work with adult readers, I personally encourage methods that consider *both* what Louise Rosenblatt (1978) calls aesthetic and efferent modes of response, or in other words, that look to the interaction between, on the one hand, the reader's lived experiences of reading, *and* on the other, the structure of story.

Briefly, I will now describe a number of important technical features of comics, which invariably influence how these texts are read. However, it is also important to note that there are no hard and fast rules about how comics must be read or written, which at least in my opinion, is one of the most exciting features of this particular art form.

Some Technical Structures of Comics Reading

First, I need to address the question, what *is* a comic? Comics artist Will Eisner (2000), who initially popularized the term “graphic novel,” also employed the term “sequential art”—which indicates how images follow another to tell a narrative—to usefully differentiate comics from other forms of artistic creation involving isolated, standalone images. Moreover, as Eisner emphasizes the inherently social nature of this art form, he writes, “I found that I was involved with an ‘art of communication’ more than simply an application of art” (p. 6). Eisner also talks about comics as “a form of reading” that works with a distinct “language.” “In its most economical state,” he notes, “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—a literary form, if you will” (p. 8). At its base, then, sequential art

describes a form of communication that deploys images in a particular order for the purposes of storytelling or sharing information. As an illustration of comics at its most fundamental, we can imagine the example of an airplane safety guide, which tells a simple narrative as a way to communicate basic facts. *Grab the oxygen mask, put it on, make sure it works, then give your child their own. Open the overhead compartment, take out a lifejacket, put it on, tighten it, and then inflate it.* As a means of straightforward communication through a series of simple images, comics can therefore function as a way to disseminate information in a style that is highly unambiguous. This orderly structure of reading, where one container of meaning (usually in square or rectangular-shaped boxes referred to as “panels”) predictably follows another, may thus allow information to be easily passed along from author to reader. However, throughout the years, comics artists have also long played with the expectations of order and sequence that a series of panels seemingly presumes.

As a more robust definition of comics, Scott McCloud (1993)—in his influential book *Understanding Comics*—describes the art form as follows: “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). As an alternative definition, Heiki Jüngst (2010) describes the “prototypical comic” as “a narrative in a sequence of panels combined into a page layout where words appear in speech balloons, captions or as onomatopoeia integrated into the picture” (p. 14). However, Jüngst also allows for a degree of variation, as she describes “less typical examples ... which do not have every element the prototype has but which are comics rather than anything else” (p. 14). Regardless of which definition we—as educators—agree with, or choose to share with our students, I personally like to follow Jungst’s lead here, and admit that however we choose to define comics, there will also be invariable exceptions to this norm.

As I have already mentioned, the negative space between panels is referred to as a gutter, while word balloons (or speech bubbles) signify the content of a character’s speech or thoughts. At times, if a character is especially animated, their word balloon may be drawn with jagged edges, which is one way that artists may signify or characterize emotional content. In the space of the gutter, as I have suggested, readers conjoin the images in the panels to create a narrative sequence. In McCloud’s (1993) book, he describes the gutter as the lifeblood of comics, and where “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (p. 66). As McCloud understands it, the reader achieves this transformation through a part-literary/part-psychological process called *closure*. In his words, such work of closure entails “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (p. 63). This leap in logic leads McCloud to define the reader, along with the comics artist, as “an equal partner in crime.” “I may have drawn the *axe* being *raised*,” he writes, “but I’m not the

one who let it *drop* or decided how *hard* the blow, or *who* screamed, or *why*. That, dear reader, was *your special crime*, each of you committing it, in your own *style*” (p. 68).

Now that I have briefly explored what comics are and how they work, I will move into a discussion of the research context in which I conversed with teachers about their pedagogical uses of such texts.

The Research Context

From May to November of 2018, I had the pleasure of meeting with fifteen English teachers, using the following questions and prompts to direct our conversations about reading and teaching with comics. I also made sure to clarify with each teacher that their responses could deviate from my questions in any way that they saw fit. As I told Steven, the first teacher I met, “I envision this as a pretty casual, informal dialogue. I have a lot of questions, but feel free to take any tangents you want. Basically, these questions are just prompts for you to tell me stories.”

As a general introductory question, I asked these teachers to tell me a little bit about themselves:

- How long they’d been teaching, what subjects they’d taught, and how they might describe their overall approaches, values, and priorities as educators.

On the subject of reading comics, I asked the following questions:

- What are your personal experiences with comics?
- Did you learn about reading and teaching with comics in university?
- How would you describe the difference between reading a comic and reading a word-based text?

From these opening questions, I hoped to establish a picture of who these teachers were, and how their interests in teaching with comics may relate to their broader educational values.

Focusing in on the subject of teaching with comics, I posed the following open-ended questions:

- How often do you use comics or graphic novels in the classroom, and how would you describe these experiences?
- When you teach with comics, where do you start?
- Where have you experienced the most success in your teaching with comics and graphic novels?
- Do you have any especially effective strategies that you can share?
- Was there anything you did that wasn’t so successful?
- How have your students responded to such texts?

- Do you notice that the environment in the classroom changes when you work with comics? And if so, how?
- How does your teaching change when using graphic novels?
- Do you develop particular assignments when teaching with graphic novels?
- Have your students been encouraged to create their own comics? And if so, what have the results of such experiments looked like?
- And lastly, how would you describe the challenges of teaching with comics and graphic novels?

Moving into the context of the wider school environment, I then asked:

- How has your teaching with comics been received by other members of the school community (including parents, administration, and other teachers)?
- Have you encountered any resistance?
- Say you were required to explain or justify your reasons for teaching with comics, how would you do so?

Finally, I asked these teachers what they would like their future teaching experiences with comics to look like, and whether they had any questions for me. Depending on the teacher's experiences and their style of conversation, the interviews lasted from twenty minutes to well over an hour, and while they were mostly conducted in the schools they worked at, either in the teacher's classroom or some other meeting space, a couple of the interviews took place in local coffee shops.

Though the following names are pseudonyms, the teachers who I met with during this study described themselves as follows:

- 1) **Steven**, who was in his 24th year of teaching English, had been reading comics since the age of 8, and described the importance of using comics to help students focus on "the process" of how stories work.
- 2) **Mark** had been teaching for 4 years, and characterized his teaching approach as "kind of like social work," involving "building relationships with the students, so it's ... a place they want to be."
- 3) **Aneela** had been working as an English teacher for eleven years, both at an alternative high school, as well as "an off-site classroom for students in drug rehab programs."
- 4) **Julie** was in her first year of teaching grade 10 English, and she emphasized the value of using relatable curriculum materials to help foster good relationships: "I just did our poetry unit," she told me, "using Tupac ... [and] half their unit tests are written about hockey, because so many of them can relate to it." As a child, her step-dad had given Julie his large collection of comics.

5) **Michael** had been working with comics for the last 15 of his 20-year teaching career. Similar to Julie, he incorporates texts that resonate well with his students' interests: "My approach," he told me, is to "pick things that I think students are going to find interesting and fun and engaging, that also have significant literary merit ... and complexity."

6) **Sarah** was in her 5th year of teaching grades 10 and 11 English. "As a kid," she told me, "I was obsessed with Archie," and describing how her teaching involves the incorporation of graphic texts, she explained that "because ... it can be tedious ... I try to be high energy and fun and funny and approachable and down to earth."

7) **Tyler** was an English Language Arts (ELA) department head in his 24th year of teaching, and though a "life-long comic book fan," he was also suspicious about how such texts are normally used in classrooms. "In most cases," he told me, "it's a dumbed down Shakespeare, and it's not a great graphic story." In his own practice, though, Tyler works with comics to help his students develop analytical skills. "I try to get them to critically analyze what they're looking at," he emphasized, "rather than love it *because* it's a comic."

8) Also an ELA department head, **Patricia** has worked in English, Art, and Music classrooms over her past 25 years of teaching, and given this eclectic experience, it is no surprise that she recognized the interdisciplinary challenge of working with comics. As she told me, "you're teaching text as much as you're teaching art when you're teaching a graphic novel." "For a lot of [ELA teachers]," she continued, "this is scary, because they've not had professional development [in visual arts]."

9) **Amanda** was in her 2nd year of teaching grade 6 English at a fine arts focused high school. She explicitly described her teaching as aligned with a constructivist theory of pedagogy: as she put it, "I work with students to help construct their own meaning out of their own learning."

10) **Danielle**, who was in her 5th year of teaching, taught at the same school as Amanda, and they worked together to develop and implement a small group study of graphic novels, thematically focused on issues of social justice. Since they were "teaching partners," I interviewed Danielle and Amanda together.

11) As a teacher librarian with 15 years of experience, and a Master's degree in adolescent literacy, **Laura** is also the Humanities curriculum coordinator at her school. She emphasized the need for students to feel a sense of attachment to what they read. "My approach to literature," she told me, "is that you need to have books that connect with students. ... If they're not connected, they're not going to develop a passion for reading."

12) A second-year teacher, **Kayla**—who also has an MA in English—described how comics can be used to help inspire young authors to develop and practice their skills of self-representation. She teaches a variety of classes, including English, creative writing, and photography, and her goal as a teacher is to "encourage students to explore their identities and think outside of themselves."

13) **Francine** is a literacy specialist and acting ELA department head. Teaching grade 10 English, she described how comics can function as “an incredible portal” into various forms of creative expression.

14) **Heather** is also an ELA department head, in her 18th year of teaching, who described her job as supporting teachers while also developing a space for experimentation in literary studies: “I’m trying to push boundaries a little bit,” she told me, “but not break any of my teachers, and hopefully keep students as engaged in the literature as possible.”

15) Lastly, I met with **Jordan**, who was in his 4th year teaching. In discussing the benefits of working with comics, Jordan described such texts as “an untapped resource” for helping students to refine their skills as storytellers, which he then associated with improved academic success. “Students who engage in storytelling,” he argued, “get better at all aspects of writing, because they’re able to think outside the box.”

Talking to Teachers about Comics

How they start their studies

When it comes to the question of how to introduce students to comics as objects of aesthetic and intellectual inquiry in the English classroom, many of these teachers emphasized the need to begin slowly, and to not take too much for granted about what their students might already know. Indeed, as Aneela explained, sometimes what students presume they know may actually be an obstacle to deeper levels of understanding. When she introduced *Maus* in the context of a grade 10 class, for instance, she lamented the fact that her students read the entire text in one sitting. “They went home and read the whole thing,” she told me, which subsequently made it difficult to slow down and analyze the graphic novel’s more intricate details. “They saw it as something fun,” Aneela noted, “and that meant that you shouldn’t have to analyze and dig deeper.”

As a way to encourage her students to read for something other than surface-level plot, Heather begins her work with comics by focusing on the technical language of this art form. As Heather mentioned, “I know that I need to make sure I do a good job of the lexicon.” Interestingly, she also expressed that for many teachers, their lack of exposure to comics disrupts their willingness to consider the value of such texts: “they won’t teach them because they’re not really sure how to.” In this context, the need to approach such texts slowly and deliberately is beneficial for both teachers and students alike. “There are no instincts for teaching a graphic novel,” she admitted, “whereas with teaching a play, teaching a novel—these have been built into our curriculum.” As I mentioned previously, there is a refreshingly experimental element to teaching with comics that many of these teachers referenced in positive terms.

Though a seasoned reader of comics, when reading such texts from a teacher's perspective, Michael noticed that his personal approach to reading privileged the textual elements above the visual. As a teacher, he therefore also needed to intentionally slow down. "And so I find," he told me, "it's 'No, no, no. Stop, slow down, look at that, that's amazing.' ... I had to adjust and read differently, too." Regarding what students might already know, Michael also admitted, "I always assume they know nothing." "Despite our assumptions about the visual proficiency of students," he continued, "they might be used to [reading images] and it might be the world they live in, but it's sort of like a fish in water: You never think about the water until it's gone, or someone points it out to you." Similarly, Steven uses McCloud's *Understanding Comics* "as a gateway and a door opener," and a means for his students to, as he puts it, "look at the *how*." Given the assumed accessibility of graphic novels, and the fact that many can be read quite quickly, Steven also believes that this focus on process in the context of graphic storytelling is not "a question that many of [his students] have ever really kicked around."

As a place to start, many of these teachers also begin with a more recognizable form, like poetry or film, which scaffolds on students' previous knowledge about how to read (or view) and effectively interpret textual meaning. As Heather put it, this pedagogical approach functions as "a bridge between what they trust and ... know" and what they don't. In practical terms, she moves her students from poetry to comics, through the study of such pieces as Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem, *Autobiography*, and E. E. Cummings' *a leaf falls*, or *l(a)*. While the former encourages students to interpret the poetic expression of personal life (which may help with the study and creation of graphic memoir), the latter demonstrates the relationship between imagistic form and meaning. As one commentator has noted, this poem "illustrates visually the separation that is the primary cause of loneliness" (DiYanni, 2003, p. 584). "I think," Heather told me, "that kind of conversation will lend itself nicely to what happens with a graphic novel," while also inspiring students to consider questions about perspective, such as: "where are you being asked to stand to see this story?" Francine has also used the personal address of poetry as a means of encouraging students to explore their lives in comics form. When teaching comics with poetry, as she explained, "personal response is the first anchor."

In Steven's classes, his students explore the "convergence of cinema language and comics language," and as they move into making comics, he asks them to use such language in their personal reflections. "Is this a mid-shot?" he might ask them, and if so, "what are we doing here? And most importantly, why are you doing it this way?" By teaching the language of comics and film together, Steven proposes that comics can be read as examples of cinematic storyboards, to help students look closely "at the process of editing and transition." Given her interdisciplinary background in visual arts, it is no surprise that Patricia also moves between the language of comics and film. As she told me about her classes, "we talk about ... film

terminology for graphic novels, [considering elements such as] background, camera angles, transitions, etc.” Similarly, Heather noted that when they study graphic texts, her students “bring together all their understandings from script writing ... [and] storyboarding,” and treat comics much as they would “any of the stills that we clipped from films and analyzed.”

In his classes, Jordan turns extensively to the language of film studies as a way to initiate and immerse his students in the study of sequential art. “Time wise,” he indicated, “it makes a lot more sense to storyboard graphic novels, than having them make a three minute film for class.” Moreover, Jordan finds that starting with film can be a particularly useful method for encouraging students’ familiarity with how the literary techniques of comics actually function: “getting them to know the terminology in a way that’s going to be internalized way more than if I just threw a bunch of terminology at them.” In metacognitive terms, Jordan uses the language of film as a way to invite his students to deliberately reflect on the process of reading comics.

Now that I have discussed how the teachers I met with begin their work with comics, I will move into a consideration of their particular teaching strategies.

Strategies for Teaching Comics

Photomontage

As an activity that bridges between film and comics, and asks of learners to “understand principles of showing rather than telling,” Jordan teaches strategies of photomontage as a way “to construct a visual narrative through sequential images.” Starting with a few key terms (such as “low angle shot or extreme close up”), he asks his students to take a series of still photos of objects in the classroom. Then, as he recounted, “we talk about the effect of a student taking a picture of a Kermit doll from a low angle shot and how that makes Kermit look strangely disturbing and intimidating.” From these initial experiments, Jordan has students develop a storyline about their own lives and transpose this story into a series of images, thus learning how to transition between these separate images without the use of words. Though the format is obviously different, Jordan claimed that especially because of their focus on transitions, his students’ narratives functioned “pretty much like a graphic novel.” Acquainting themselves with the grammar of the gutter, his students were able to explore an important difference between comics and film, and develop “the ability to play around with what’s hidden.”

Comics Creation

Tyler incorporates a similar kind of activity in his teaching, as his students create what he calls “a personal type of text using comic book techniques.” “I don’t care if you can only draw stick men,” he told me, “or if you want to go home and take pictures of your Transformers.”

Since his students are not being marked on their ability to draw, but instead on their willingness and ability to narrativize events in comics form, Tyler explained his expectations as follows: “it needs to tell a story, it needs to have some visual symbols, it needs to be doing something on purpose with the speech balloons, ... [and] it has to [come together] to create a singular effect.” Crucially, Tyler also emphasized the pedagogical importance of “giving the parameters to force the idea.” For instance, he may tell his students that their comics need be six to eight panels, and even though this detail may not be that important—“I’m always flexible,” Tyler joked, “I just never tell them that” —he stressed the value of being deliberate and clear in his expectations. “If you give a series of checklists,” he told me, “things they have to do, even though they might rail against it, they’ll find a way to make it work.” Working with his students to create comics, Tyler thus finds pedagogical value in the use of enabling constraints.

Adopting a similar approach as Tyler, Patricia asks her students to create a graphic biography, where their task, as she explained it, is “to tell someone else’s story, or their own, using a storyboard ... [and] being sure to imply graphic novel conventions.” Moreover, given that not all her students consider themselves as visual artists, Patricia permits them to use a broad range of modalities. “In a digital world,” she noted, “it doesn’t matter if they can produce it manually themselves or if they do it through digital means.” As Rowsell and Burke (2009) contend, without an understanding of digital practices of reading and composition, “educators are only scratching the surface of their students’ learning capacities” (p. 117). As with Tyler’s expectations, Patricia is also quite explicit about certain parts of her assignment: “No less than a two-page, and no more than a four-page spread,” and as something for her students to work towards, “we always have a gallery date where they show their work.” In such creative assignments, Patricia expressed how students are typically quite surprised by what they are able to accomplish.

Though Julie also discussed her past experiences using strategies of comics creation in the context of social studies teaching—which, as a means of visualization, improved her students’ abilities to remember facts about historical figures—she also mentioned a project in which her students produced a graphic representation of a longer piece of word-based fiction. “We just read *Deathwatch* by Robb White,” she told me, “and one of their assignments was to choose a scene and create a comic strip of it.” As with Tyler and Patricia, Julie was also not concerned with whether her students could draw, but whether they could transform the meaning of a story into visual, sequential terms. As she said, “I’m ok if they want to find clip art, if they want to find pictures on the Internet, or if they want to cut pictures out of a magazine. Whatever they need to do to make it visual.” Using a similar strategy of transmediation—which refers to “a response composed in a medium other than that of the original text” (Zoss, 2009, p. 184)—Sarah asked her students to create a 6-panel comic, imagining the events

immediately following the ambiguous end of Frank Stockton's imaginative short story *The Lady, or the Tiger?*

To briefly address the challenges of assessing students' comics creations, much like any other visual piece in English, the focus of assessment typically remains on how such experiments correspond to the needs of literacy education writ large, which the Alberta curriculum defines as, "the ability, confidence and willingness to engage with language to acquire, construct and communicate meaning in all aspects of daily living" (Alberta Education, n.d.). As such, it is generally taken for granted that visual experiments in the English classroom need to be somehow connected to the operations of language. For many of these teachers, this implies that their students' visual efforts need not be aesthetically pleasing. For example, as Tyler told me, "I don't care if it's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." However, regardless of what their students create, these efforts need to be somehow considered, or justified, through the use of language, which usually takes the form of what Patricia calls "an artist's statement": a short document that describes "the intentions behind the student's artwork." On this point, Tyler also emphasized, "what I do mark is if you can tell me what you tried to do and how you used a number of steps along the way in order to do it." Similarly, Jordan assesses his students through their self-reflections. "Even if it bombs," he told me, "if they can show me what their intention was, I can still mark that." This sort of reflection also typically accompanies students' visual art in larger collections of portfolio-based literacy assessments, where as Steven noted, students "choose and polish" a number of items to demonstrate their proficiency and growth over time in relation to specific learning outcomes, and in the form of process *and* product. In Laura's use of such a collection, she has a number of types of writing that students *need* to include, though she has also has a "wildcard category" where students are more freely able "to take a risk" and submit a visual or multimodal piece.

As we can see, then, many ELA teachers who encourage the practice of comics creation do not require their students to draw at all. While some teachers simply do not think that focusing on visual art is an appropriate use of an English teacher's time—as Tyler put it, "I'm not an art class and I don't mark creativity"—others feel that a focus on aesthetics may detract from the more critical or interpretive purposes of ELA education. As Patricia noted, "I try very hard when I'm marking their visuals not to be dissuaded by beautiful art ... if it adds no depth to the text, it's not necessarily going to get a better mark in the end."

Laura, however, considers the value of drawing and making visual art as "a sort of meditative break" from the disciplinary norms of academic English. "It's like a reprieve," she told me, "not that it's less serious, but it feels different," and allows students the opportunity to experience the potential of literacy as an embodied event (Lenters & Whitford, 2018). "Putting their pen on the paper," Laura's students are thus encouraged to enter the process of

“making something tactile.” In these moments of visual experimentation, Laura often draws with her students, and though she acknowledged that such collective exercises may be frightening—“it’s vulnerable,” she admitted, “it’s kind of scary”—she finds them humbling as well. Heather also discussed her willingness to be vulnerable with her classes in the study of comics, by stating, “I’ll tell them ... I’m learning and we’ll figure it out together.” Since Laura’s students eventually develop a capacity for making visual symbols, no matter how crude, such methods of visual art also address the all-too-common refrain of “I can’t draw.”

Literature Circles & Station Work

In their use of literature circles, Amanda and Danielle selected five graphic novels with a broad social justice focus: Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Raina Telgemeier’s *Drama*, Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire’s *Secret Path*, Katherena Vermette’s *A Girl called Echo*, and Irene Watts’ *Good-bye Marianne: A Story of growing up in Nazi Germany*. To help their students make a book selection, these teaching partners opened their unit with a “blind date book tasting,” where the books themselves were completely covered in wrapping paper, with nothing but a small synopsis on the front. With students walking around the classroom and reading the various synopses, the intent of this opening activity was for readers to choose the book whose story they found the most alluring, and “to focus on the content within and ... the themes,” rather than only the visuals.

Throughout this unit, as Amanda explained, she and Danielle emphasized “process and learning, rather than product and grade,” with the main assignment taking the form of a portfolio of visual responses collectively referred to as a “thought chronicle,” which as I have written elsewhere (Lewkowich, 2019e), is a multimodal practice of response and transmediation, underscoring the idea that words alone cannot sufficiently determine meaning in the literacy classroom. As Mackey and McClay (2005) have noted, encouraging young readers to participate in “the dance of meaning between words and pictures” (p. 193) may help them to see the connection between texts as they appear in the classroom and as they circulate out of school. They emphasize that “Adolescents are perhaps the ideal audience for the kind of subversiveness that becomes possible when two semiotic systems work with and against each other” (p. 196). While sharing their readings in small groups, Amanda and Danielle’s students begin each day with an “Anchor Question” related to a theme that all the books have in common, which Amanda said was a way “to frame their discussion,” and “get them all thinking about something related to social justice.” Considering these questions and working with their pre-assigned literature circle roles (such as Discussion Director, Illustrator, Connector, Vocabulary Finder, Summarizer, etc.), Amanda characterized the room as “abuzz,” while Danielle said that “students were focused and engaged ... and really into it.” In her students’ development of strategies for multimodal analysis, Amanda also noted that she was surprised by the ways in which some of their interpretations and styles of reading were

quite unlike her own. “I’m realizing,” she told me, “that I read the words first and then I go back and look at the visuals, and some of my students are the opposite.” Indeed, through teaching this unit, Amanda and Danielle came to realize that if students are “given the freedom to explore their thoughts, without an assessment attached,” they will often see things in the text that their teachers themselves would never presume.

As a similar kind of group activity, and a way to get her students out of their seats while learning about Spiegelman’s *Maus*, Patricia organized a series of stations around her class, which offered students a choice in their learning and a variety of ways to demonstrate and further enhance their textual understandings. “When we’re in the thick of the novel,” she said, “I will create different stations where they have to do different tasks,” including a station for drama and charades, one for visual experimentation, one for writing, and one to practice skills of annotation and other forms of close reading. As a way to ensure that students get the opportunity to experiment with as many modalities of learning and reading as possible, Patricia noted, “they get ten minutes at each station and then they’re flipped through.”

Shakespeare

Two of the teachers I spoke with, Mark and Sarah, worked with graphic novel versions of Shakespeare plays, and though they both considered how the original language is presented in abridged form—as Mark said, “you’re losing some of the language ... this is like a quarter of the words that would be in the actual play”—they also noted the valuable benefits of using these adaptations. For instance, working with a graphic novel version of *Romeo and Juliet*, Mark immediately noticed that his students entered his class with an increased sense of “enthusiasm,” “engagement,” and “enjoyment.” While leading his students in whole-class readings, Mark also remarked that “every student was eager to take a role,” and that their focus was much improved from when he was using the script alone. As he told me, “you could hear a pin drop.”

While guiding her class through a graphic novel version of *Macbeth*, Sarah also observed a noticeably increased sense of student enthusiasm and participation. As she recalled, “They were much more willing to dive in. They would ask me repeatedly, ‘Are we reading today?’” However, Sarah also made the argument that, since it provides “the visual context,” a graphic novel more effectively presents the particularly theatrical and performative qualities of Shakespeare’s plays. “It’s supposed to be seen,” she argued, “it’s supposed to be experienced in a visual way, not necessarily just read.” As opposed to film, which also presents the text as performance, Sarah further described how graphic novels offer students a chance to linger slowly over the narrative. “You get to consume it,” Sarah said, “you get to take it home, you get to spend some time with it.”

Before she'd assign the text, however, Sarah would also make sure that she taught her students a variety of skills associated with visual analysis. For example, they would look at art and photographs together and consider the play of light and shadow—as she might ask her students, “what do things in shadows communicate?” After helping them develop these preliminary skills of observation, Sarah would then project certain pages from the graphic novel on a document camera, and encourage her students to think about the text in the same ways that they would a piece of art. “Ok,” she might ask them, “if Macbeth is ... shaking his bloody hands in the air, how is that being perceived by everyone else? What are the visual techniques here telling us about his character? Or, if half of his face is in darkness, what's the symbolic meaning in that? How can we use our visual analysis skills to figure this out?” Sarah also developed another similar activity in which she would scan a full page from the graphic novel, and as a way to get her students to focus on the visual cues alone, she would remove the speech bubbles. “Dialogue here doesn't matter,” she would tell her students, and then she'd pose the following questions: “What's being communicated visually? What's being communicated in terms of ... theme? What are the author's choices telling you about what's happening?” By explicitly directing her students away from words, Sarah encourages them to develop their own understandings about the relational dynamics of visual communication.

Sarah also noted that such pedagogical strategies of visualization may help students to internalize the narrative complexities of Shakespeare's text. As she told me, “you remember visual imagery in a way that is different than how you remember just reading a play.” Indeed, as Steven put it, while there are many possible entrances to reading a comic, encouraging his students to “see the entirety of the story through the pictures” also enables them to learn how to read the visual as a space of narrative complexity; “whereas,” he said, “if you flip through the pages of *The Great Gatsby*, all you're going to see is words.”

Encouraging Practices of Close Reading: “There's actually layers there”

While learning to read the visual, students are also becoming acquainted with strategies of close reading, which as Jane Gallop (2000) writes, “emphasizes small details” (p. 11), “slows us down” (p. 12), and “pays attention to elements in the text which, although marginal, are nonetheless emphatic [and] prominent” (p. 8). As Sarah's students notice the play of light and shadow in comics art, they may also start paying attention to how color and darkness communicate meaning across a variety of narrative forms. Moreover, though such meaning may not always be explicit, developing a practice of close reading allows students to notice the multiple layers of communication at work in reading experience, especially when it comes to multimodal textual forms like comics. As Tyler described, “First of all, we access [a comic], and then we look at how this was put together, ... how this thing is built and engineered. And then, all of a sudden [my students] go, ‘I thought that was really straightforward and simple, but there's actually layers there.’”

While analyzing these potential layers of meaning, Heather explicitly describes her students' interpretive methods as a process of "dissection": "We take it apart and we put it back together and we see how the machine works." She also encourages viewing the practice of reading comics as a recursive act where students are equipped to re-enter the text a second time, which is a regrettably uncommon practice in English classrooms. "If I had it my way," Heather emphasized, "a kid would read every novel that we study twice. So I have to figure out ways to get them to re-enter the text ... [to] suggest that it's worth a second look ... and just to slow down." As a way to get her students to focus closely and deliberately on the author's use of small details, Patricia has developed what she calls a "Chapter Focus" assignment, where students, in effect, "become the teacher for a particular chapter." Similar to Heather's previous description of *interpretation as dissection*, Patricia described how her students "take apart the chapter ... show the techniques that are used ... the perceived intention behind those techniques, and any sort of historical context that would help us make more sense of it."

Rather than concentrate only on one text, both Michael and Steven described activities in which their students were asked to conduct comparative readings. In a "larger thematic study of several different pieces of literature," Michael's students read *Maus* along with Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz* and Joe Kubert's *Yossel*, which are two other graphic novels that also deal with World War II and the Holocaust. Reading across these texts—for instance, comparing styles of art and illustration, and how such styles affect the reader in different ways—students may come to recognize how the aesthetic choices that an author makes appears to affect the strength and authenticity of their text's "emotional impact." Looking closely at different versions of a recognizable comics character, such as Superman, and paying close attention to the changes between these versions, Steven suggests that students may be able to develop comparative commentaries about comics, and how for instance, "this particular version of a character represents his or her time." Such a strategy may be especially effective when a character is part of a student's modern repertoire of popular culture examining, for instance, the differences between a 1940s version of Archie and his contemporary manifestation in the Netflix show, *Riverdale*.

Radio Plays

On the topic of Archie, Julie developed an especially innovative pedagogical strategy, which works with comics as a means of also engaging her students in the study of modern drama. Thinking of drama in broad terms, Julie began this activity by sharing the script for a 20-minute Archie radio play from the 1940s, while she and her students listened together to the original broadcast. Given that this version of Archie is quite dated, it took students a few minutes to recognize that the character of Archie was one they were already familiar with. However, when one of Julie's student's wondered out loud, "isn't this guy from a comic book,

or something?” she replied, “funny you should ask.” And then, as she told me, “I actually found the original comic strip that the radio play was based off—it was only about 4 pages long—and I gave it to them, and they were like, ‘What? How? How did you get a 20-minute radio play out of 4 pages of this?’” Given that the radio play has a narrator, Julie explained the similarities and differences between these forms of storytelling, and that the radio play is twenty minutes long because it needs to explain everything—through words, which takes time—that the comic communicates through image. “The text was exactly the same,” she emphasized, “but what did the comic show us that the narrator needs to tell us? That was the question.” Once they understood the relation between these stories, Julie said that her students were quickly able to articulate how the radio play works. “When they had those two resources together,” she said, “they could tell me absolutely everything I needed to know about that radio play. They were able to determine theme, conflict, tone, mood; they could tell me all about characterization, setting, all the big things.” What is more, she also insisted, “it’s cemented in their brains. If I asked one of them right now to tell me the eight major plot points, they could, because they can see the pictures and they can remember exactly what it looked like when it was happening.” Again, this teacher emphasizes the connection between visualization, memory, and deep learning.

Since her students were now quite familiar with how a dramatic script operates, and what its function was, Julie then had them move (or transmediate) in the opposite direction: to take an *Archie* comic and create a radio play from one of its stories. “I gave each student their own *Archie* comic from my personal collection,” she told me, “I gave it to them, I said, ‘This is yours. Keep it.’” “Their assignment,” she continued, “was to find a short comic strip that they enjoyed, and turn that comic back into a radio play ... which forced them to look at what’s happening in the pictures and describe it using words.” In making the move from image to words, some of the questions that students considered were: “How do they incorporate sound effects? How do they incorporate stage direction?” Given the complexity of this assignment, it is no surprise that Julie feels excited and empowered to continue using comics in the classroom, though she also warns: “I find [teaching with] comics is actually more work, because you have so many ways to look at it and so many different interpretations.”

Rationales

Though the teachers I spoke with over the course of this study offered various kinds of evidence for the value of using graphic novels in the classroom, since there is still, as Francine noted, a “cultural stigma against comics,” I will end this paper by explicitly pointing to the reasons that teachers believe these texts warrant inclusion in the contemporary contexts of ELA teaching and learning. While most of these teachers admitted that the only major impediments to teaching comics are what Steven referred to as the “universal limiters” of “time and money,” some teachers did note a few instances where parents, students, and even

other teachers, questioned the legitimacy of working with such texts. For example, Julie said that some students “think it’s silly” and that it’s “not academic enough,” Steven recounted a story in which a “veteran teacher” told him “graphic novels just leave me cold,” while as Michael put it, “parents are a whole other level of skeptical at times.” Given these sorts of reservations, it is important for teachers to be able to adequately defend their curricular choices. As Heather told me, with every new text that she selects, she asks herself: “Is it going to teach them what it needs to teach them? Is it the right vessel? Is it the right medium?”

Firstly, a number of these teachers indicated that, because of their multimodal nature, comics are a valuable resource for teaching skills of visual and media literacy. As Heather noted, these texts “fit in well with the viewing strand” of the language arts curriculum, and can help students prepare for the “visual components” of the grade 12 diploma exam. As Laura emphasized, comics can thus be used to invite students “to read and analyze and critique images like we do with text.” Moreover, as Amanda pointed out, in the context of student’s lives outside of school, there is an increased “need for instructions surrounding visual literacy,” including the question of how to help adolescents engage critically “with multiple means of expression and representation.” “The reality,” Mark described, “is that it’s a cellphone generation, and students are visually driven.” “When teaching young people,” he underlined, “we gotta tune in to what they’re doing.” Moreover, as Laura articulated, teachers have a “huge responsibility” to investigate the influence of contemporary media texts in students’ lives.

Along with helping students develop such skills of critical analysis, however, reading and making comics can also support young people to manage the complexity of the contemporary world; as Laura told me, while her students are engaged in the process of comics creation, they learn how to “wrestle with ambiguity,” as they “come up with creative solutions in a set amount of time.” As Steven described them, comics are “multi-layered” and have “a dual narrative,” and if students can learn to “internalize that convergence,” they may feel less intimidated by such dual narratives as they appear in other aspects of their lives. Even for his most capable students, Steven also noted that comics foster a contemplative mode of literary engagement, similar to Laura’s earlier comments regarding the link between visual practices of creative expression and what she called a “meditative break.” As Steven told me, “for some of my strongest readers, who predominantly read just word-based texts, they go very slowly through the graphic novel, which is kind of cool, because it ... gives them a little bit of a chance to breathe.”

More than just affecting how students read and learn, however, teaching with comics also appears to have a significantly positive influence on teacher’s creative lives in the classroom. For instance, as Michael discussed his students’ increased enthusiasm, he mentioned that

since they're "more willing to ask questions" when studying comics, the classroom environment changes considerably and feels more like a "community." Steven described how, when he's teaching with comics, he typically feels more emboldened to "experiment with and pry open the potential boundaries that might exist in a classroom." Similarly, Julie said that her work with comics has allowed her to develop an array of "more creative lessons."

As a reader, Heather noted that the interpretive complexity of comics has actually taught her to slow down in her own reading. "When I first started," she said, "I would blast through them ... but that's not happening as much anymore." Though, more importantly, such texts have also reminded her to postpone judgment regarding her own understandings of textual meaning and value; "because English," she told me, "has never been about being right." Likewise, Francine described how since she started teaching with comics, she has become more adept at "interrogating and reflecting on my own process."

Lastly, many of these teachers supported their uses of working with comics by arguing that, to make their experiences of learning and reading useful, students need to be exposed to as many forms of communication and literature as possible. As Laura affirmed, "I don't believe that we should be limiting any form or genre to students," while as Julie argued, "to find meaning through literature," students need to be equipped in as many ways as possible—"It's another tool in your toolbox."

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have stressed the productively experimental and uncertain nature of teaching with comics and graphic novels, through which English teachers are often applying insights and objectives gleaned from experiences working with other modalities of literature and representation, including poetry, drama, and film. In terms of its effects on the ELA curriculum as a whole, where the idea of taking such texts seriously is still a relatively new phenomenon, comics thus appear as a borderline, mobile and flexible textual form. Their hybridity also seems to encourage teachers to practice pedagogy as a speculative act—to teach without quite knowing where one's teaching will eventually end up. Through the use of such strategies as photomontage, transmedial response, text creation, and drawing as a meditative device, teachers—along with their students—become "entangled within" (Rowse et al., 2018, p. 18) the literary and affective discourse of comics art, where such categories as reading/writing/drawing and image/word no longer appear as discrete and discontinuous. Instead, by working with such an open and inherently promiscuous literary structure as comics, teachers encourage a sense of familiarity and flow between modalities, forms, genres, and literacy practices. As such, I read the above descriptions of classroom life as open questions on the state of teaching with comics today, where teachers are learning along with their students how to best move slowly and deliberately through their encounters with this

particularly distinctive art form. Moving forward, the challenge for educators thus involves the issue of how to continually renew the power of these texts as open questions, and how to allow their intrinsically interdisciplinary provocations to newly inspire recursive encounters with and of curious and humble pedagogies.

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