

## Crafting a Critical Literacy Skillset: An Improved Use of Visual Modalities

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of literacy development at schools is a standing feature of the curriculum. In spite of this, the means to develop critical thinking in students often comes up short. The development of literacy and critical thinking can be presented in engaging and memorable ways, but schools often defer to what they have done in the past; namely through textbooks and worksheets. This article will argue that the greater and structured incorporation of graphic novels and comic literature, but from a critical literacy perspective, will have the effect of increasing engagement of the subject matter. A closer engagement through visual means, coupled with a teaching pedagogy that directly supports critical literacy skill development builds the best experience and engagement of student learning.

**Key words:** Graphic Novels, Comic Literature, Critical Literacy, Modalities, Analysis, Literacy Instruction

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### INTRODUCTION

Modern social and civic literacy demands learning an evolving skillset of students so that they are not left behind as the platforms of social and media interaction evolve and change (West and Williams, 2015). Therefore, it is not only the printed works that comprise an essential literacy learning experience, but also the information that is electronic or travels wirelessly. The modern and more thorough merging of printed and electronic formats by virtue of innate compatibility means that modern literacy have dimensions of visual elements that go far beyond written words and encompass everything from basic symbolism to complex meanings generated through video or other means. This is the information that mostly comprises the modern literary and media diet for Generation Z.

It is understood that technology is constantly altering or augmenting the educational landscape, if only by fractions of degrees at a time. This has direct implications for the manner by which teachers and students work together, by virtue of the particular mediums or platforms through which they interface. Common examples of this can be found in the use of iPad apps, whiteboards, streaming video, and the like. A consistent feature across both printed works and technology is that they have a sizeable visual element. It is the nature and presence of this visual element as it relates to student learning that is the focus of this article.

Graphic novels and comic literature offer a unique combination of learning modalities that is vivid, engaging, and multi-faceted in content and context-building. They are built with an innate ability to both introduce and/or expand any subject and this has real instructional implications for every

academic subject. The final goal of literacy development lies in the development of critical literacy skills. The curricular vehicles that help a student arrive with this skillset are numerous and varied and would be even more bolstered by the expanded presence and use of graphic novels and comic literature. These should be considered an integral component of student learning.

This study proceeds from a foundational assumption that the end goal of education lies in the creation and/or further development of critical literacy as a skillset of the student. This does not represent merely an intellectual or academic exercise, but involves the development of both empathy and perspective on the part of the learner (Jadallah, 2000). This type of constructivist approach to teaching and learning utilizes elements of learning theory developed by both Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. The sociocultural elements of Vygotsky's learning theory form an important tapestry against which to set the content and concepts being taught. The content and set of concepts that form the instructional framework rely on an in-depth understanding of student cognitive and emotional development. A combination of the appropriate instructional support coupled with the socialized nature of a larger discourse as it relates to the subject of study form the vehicle through which students learn effectively (Smagorinsky, 2007).

Crafting and supporting the development of skillset is not an end, but rather learning adaptation and discussion through the process. The nature of a cognitive constructivist approach to teaching and curriculum planning means that the teacher works to provide a rich array of textual materials and resources that motivates this learning process going forward. Historically, the broad topic of critical literacy should be un-

derstood as an umbrella term in this context, as it applies to all academic and other subjects across all school settings. One example of this umbrella context is the use of film in developing literacy skills in numerous academic areas (i.e. history, civics, literature, and science) (Vetrie, 2004). Students are no strangers to the use of film, but it's used to develop critical awareness and literacy skills involving more ingredients than a printed narrative. Through an expanded understanding of what is both intended and meant by the term 'text' in these circumstances, the teacher will both choose and frame their instruction and the resources they use to do their jobs. The concept of a broader interpretive framework for what constitutes the 'text' and the nature for how it counts as a resource is useful here Pinar (1995). There are competing and complimentary elements in each story/medium that reinforce one another. It is in this space that the transcendent nature of the graphic image holds the greatest value. This visual image is often the important and common component that cements the knowledge or information taught and learned. Citing Chisolm, Shelton, and Sheffield (2017), Frederick, Crampton, and Davis (2019) remind us that emotive empathy is an important component in learning. The combination of rich graphic imagery, engaging content, and effective pedagogy facilitate greater understanding and empathy through the integration of both linguistic and visual texts.

### Modern Forms of Literacy Instruction

Literacy, as it is generally understood, represents the ability of a student to decode or understand new or unfamiliar information and proceed accordingly afterwards. Accordingly, there is no shortage of literacy curricula that may be developed or purchased as the school or educator sees fit. Critical literacy, as the term will be used here, represents a much deeper level of understanding than any series of texts or other curricular resources generally allow for. Part of this is an issue of time and the ability to cover such a wide berth of content. In critical literacy, however, it is not always a matter of bulk in the curriculum, but the manner of its approach to discussion and the building of understanding. Critical literacy skillsets enable students to not only study, but also evaluate their own circumstances or those which they are learning about (Mitchell, 2006). Developing an increased sense of self-awareness in relation to any topic or social construct of information is the goal. The practical applications of this kind of learning beyond school are what are required to navigate the society and economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The primary delivery vehicles of classroom literacy instruction are well-established and they are as varied as the pedagogies of the teachers that teach them. While there is certainly a consistent degree of modification and revision to texts and their use, the basic forms have not changed that much. The extensive use of children's literature and other titles has augmented the use of existing basal and other readers. Literacy circles and learning stations are often populated with all manner of different genres of literature. There are books to read that readily offer assessments (electronic and printed), and then there is the plethora of ancillary materials that come with any textbook series, for teachers or schools

who adopt. I do not argue against the use of these materials, but rather am observing the limitations of this kind of repetitious and standardized curriculum as it impacts the development of student critical skills across the K-12 learning spectrum. Much of the modern curriculum is oriented towards assessment, not the other way around. The focus should be on the process. Strict adherence to the evaluative component such as repeated standardized forms of testing and assessment forms a bottleneck on the flow of information and understanding. The assessments that Generation Z have grown up with do not always exist outside school. What value is anyone to place on the knowledge they have learned in school if it was only ever validated through a test?

Building a process like this means operating from a set of assumptions that is not altogether different, but oriented in a way that focuses on the transaction of meaning to the student. Not the testing of that meaning. A powerful answer is to imbue the literacy process with a vivid and engaging graphic component, but in a manner that is focused on great pedagogy. Learning modalities represent broad categories and applied pragmatically across classrooms. Literacy modalities focused on student learning employ a range of different instructional strategies that target learning in certain ways. Listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and visually representing are all modalities that converge to build a skillset so students can receive and interact with new information (Jacobs, 2007). While the visual dimension is inherent to most of these modalities, it represents a unique means to connect vivid and engaging content in ways that are not always or commonly done from an instructional perspective. Through interactions with graphic formats students are presented with complex features to stories and other narratives that require them to think in different terms from what set of constructed meanings a traditional textual narrative would present. Boerman-Cornell (2015) argues that visual mediums such as graphic novels present a resource through which students can better contextualize the information they are provided, and so expand the possibilities of corroboration of historical or other sources. This is the essence of the process and skillset of critical literacy.

The use of graphic novels and comic literature is nothing new to classrooms. The visual nature of both forms is embedded in the reading experiences of students, both inside and outside of school. In terms of educational and pedagogical legitimacy, the presence of both in classrooms is far more informal and teacher-directed than being representative of broader educational practice. Though educational standards imply goals and objectives that are visual or multimodal in nature, the terminology of graphic novel and comic literature pedagogy and use is not a common term. As a result, the presence and use of these materials constitutes is more akin to a bottom-up approach to curriculum design and execution (Richardson, 2017).

In becoming proficient in using and teaching through mediums and/or genre's such as this, the teacher is bolstering the significant pedagogical resources they already have. The complimentary nature of a graphic form or story as it accompanies other parts of the school curriculum represents a practically useful and transactive form of exchange between teacher and student. This transaction is carried through conveying and

discussing the kind of imagery that all can appreciate. Modern students live in an image-rich world must naturally make meaning out of all the information this provides as it represents value to them and is part of the human experience (Clark, 2013; Hassett and Schieble, 2007). If the general skillsets that form this type of visual and media literacy are relegated to being self-taught (mostly outside the school), then the younger generation is being groomed to be little more than receivers of information without the ability to be actors on it or contributors to it.

### THE UNIQUE NATURE OF GRAPHIC AND COMIC LITERATURE

Graphic forms of literature, as opposed to the textbook, is written for a different reason; primarily one that is aesthetic in nature. While the textbook represents a useful and utility-driven compendium of information, the curricular resources and support framework which accompany this are still built around the delivery of a specified curriculum with a specific focus. The graphic novel and comic literature, on the other hand, are written with the intention of presenting the affective side of the story (Duncan et al., 2015; Rapp, 2011; Sun, 2017; Versaci, 2001). This naturally invites greater exploration since the graphic engagement is built around the story, instead of presented as a supplement to it.

The strength of a pedagogy inclusive of several modalities lies in the ability to foster learning conditions that help reinforce understanding the essence of the human narrative. Otherwise, why should we be learning, if not to improve our general collective conditions? Through the combination of critical literacy skills and graphic arts pedagogy, teachers do not sacrifice any standard of instruction, by which they must operate; they only build on them. With the proper instructional or group approach, these graphic titles or subjects can represent what students remember the most from a unit of study.

With this relatively recent and still evolving addition to the canon of the modern school curricula, it is equally important to provide the kind of pedagogy and training that supports it properly. Many teachers going into schools today have grown up with this visual medium and experience embedded within their own education but not to an evolved degree. The challenge is because they were on the receiving end of this learning transaction and not taught to deconstruct and question it. The nature and effectiveness of teacher pedagogy as it incorporates the use of critical literacy skills in graphic novels is a highly individual and select feature and may also depend heavily on the teacher's own liking or affinity for the medium. Graphic instruction pedagogy is a skillset like any other in teaching. It represents studying and understanding a particular means of approach and becoming better at it.

### Critical Literacy Frameworks through Graphic Works

What does a pedagogy of this sort look like? The first feature to consider is that critical literacy demands a critical lens (Wilson, 2014). As an example, teachers from history or English often have different criteria that guides their choice and use of literature, but a common feature between the two disciplines is that they generally employ a structure of evaluative

criteria as the primary lens in judging the works they use. By expanding the nature of this operational criteria by embedding further instruction that incorporates visual and art elements represents the kind of inquiry that is reflective and introspective in nature, the teacher and students amplify the nature and impact of the content they are studying. Pargliaro (2014) argues that it is essential to operate by a structured framework in deciding which sources or titles to use. There is also no reason that this framework cannot be mutually constructed by the teacher and students. While not all teachers can employ this kind of curricular negotiation, for those who can, it represents an experience that is unique and instructive for everyone. This develops the mentality of commitment and understanding of what it means to be a stakeholder. The fact that two academic subjects (i.e. math and science) may have somewhat different criteria in choosing their materials does not represent an impediment when approached from a critical literacy skillset perspective. The features of critical literacy make it a concept that seeks to incorporate different perspectives or facets of a particular situation.

From the point the student engages these materials, or prompts, the student may take an expanding leading role and become increasingly responsible for their own work and progress. Teaching from a graphic novel involves more than the standard compliment of discussion questions (Brenna, 2013; Labio, 2011). Graphic novels and comic literature present their narratives in a closed space, so the value is carried even further by some of the smaller elements or representations of the story.

Comic literature is most known for depicting the tale of the superhero or the journey of the underdogs. Graphic novels, on the other hand, operate across a vast terrain of potential content and themes. The intimacy with which this visual narrative is presented represents a rich repository for issues and topics that may be explored by any small or large group (Gorlewski and Schmidt, 2011; Williams, 2008). A unique challenge that comic literature must contend with, however, is that of space and momentum. With only a specified number of pages in which to tell a story, important story decisions must be made. In the creative sphere for artists and writers, this is where crucial discussions will be had and decisions made in how to best tell a story. The teacher and students can explore this same time and space, reasoning for character choice (requiring additional research), relevance of certain story elements such as characters, time, place, setting, and plot and develop a deeper understanding of the subject (Bridges, 2009; King, 2012; Schieble, 2014; Wolfe and Kleijwegt, 2012).

### A Curriculum Planning Framework

While there are numerous means of instruction that develop critical literacy, this researcher will only suggest a point in which to begin, as there are far smarter and creative teachers in the world, than I. With this, I will suggest a place to begin. Understanding by Design (UbD) represents an approach to instruction and planning whereby the larger and most enduring goals for learning a topic of study form the focus of instruction in the first place (Wiggins and McTigue, 2005). In essence, the plan for instruction stems directly from the



goals, rather than a summarized list of educational objectives. The 'backward design' principle of curriculum design couples very efficiently with a highly visual means, such as a graphic novel or other. Connecting this instructional design framework to an identified set of critical literacy objectives represents a potent vehicle of pedagogy and resources.

For teachers who may not be lifelong comic book or graphic novel readers, the ability to connect into the rhyme and flow of comic literature may be awkward. And while every teacher navigates this terrain differently, a default and skeptical response would be to rely on the same kind of questioning or discussion strategies as employed elsewhere. Sacrificing opportunities for critical questioning and reflection presents an opportunity lost.

In developing an instructional framework for graphic literature, a different series of questions will be asked. The broader questions asked by the teacher through their instruction will be focused on the larger themes or issues of the graphic works or of the curriculum as a whole. In essence, what are the foundational assumptions or critical foundations of the piece? Teachers can incorporate questions that address principles of art as the imagery is most of what carries the narrative. Proceeding through the instruction and directing it so the framework of these critical questions not only covers the material and objectives, but ensures that a space for larger discussions to take place. These larger discussions will naturally arise when students read and ask the necessary kinds of reflective or introspective questions found in critical literacy.

There are two primary features to the Understanding by Design instructional planning approach that make it compatible with a graphic instructional pedagogy. One is the development of essential questions. The other is development of the enduring understanding that result through inquiry into these questions. Essential questions that students learn to ask through this experience are broad and multifaceted. The addition of a visual modality to the literary experience has the effect of increasing the intrinsic curiosity, at least from the perspective of it being a novel experience. Properly supported by instruction, students learn to view, interpret, and assign subsequent meaning to information in more complex ways. This brings together the worlds of aesthetic and academic learning. This includes a critical interpretation of the story itself the accompanying plot and character points which are common and necessary for literary analysis. Adding to this can be a plethora of follow-up opportunities: 1) subsequent research associated with the written work, 2) an introduction to original or further works by an author, 3) comparative analysis between the original written work and graphic adaptations, 4) the presence and influence of and the value of acuity in visual literacy, and the list may go on. The ultimate value of the intersection between graphic works and critical literacy lies in that the teacher creates a self-perpetuating process that continuously feeds itself, requiring only maintenance and nurturing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The growing presence of graphic and comic literature in schools shows no signs of abating. With this, an inevitable question will have to be asked to those who produce and

consume graphic works. The current primary emphasis for graphic novels lies with various genres of fiction. Ultimately, schools will have to decide the kinds of areas and emphasis for materials that will constitute their inventory. The publishing industry will respond accordingly. It is neither productive nor practical to suggest doing away with textbooks or any other particular curriculum resource and replacing them with graphic novels and comic literature. What is proposed here is an expansion of that particular dimension of instructional resource.

Making graphic novels and comic literature a standing part of literacy resources actively used by teachers will connect the essence of developing critical literacy skills with this modern visual text that constitutes the environment we live in, but only if supported through effective pedagogy. In examining the numerous levels of analysis and evaluation that occur across a literary and visual transaction, the scope of inquiry and learning extends beyond the intellectual and academic to include affective dimensions of knowledge.

The results of this study indicated that the younger generation requires a greater breadth of literacy abilities on different levels and in modalities which are inherently adaptive and critically-oriented. This is made evident through the sheer number of social media platforms and other means by which students interact with one another and make use of the information delivered through these same means. The common ingredient across these platforms is that they have a visual element to them. This is a feature that members of Generation Z and those afterwards will come to require as part of the social experience. This is an inherent strength to the medium of graphic novels and comic literature. The importance of critical literacy for people taking their place in a complex society cannot be overstated. Teachers and schools should further embrace this reality and incorporate it across numerous levels and areas of instruction. The benefit would be amplified even more if it were coupled with effective pedagogy that targets the development of critical literacy skills. Students will be endowed with the means and skills to go out and make and construct their own meanings in the world.

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