

## Graphic Novels in Today's Elementary Classrooms

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**Jodi L. Pilgrim**

University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, TX

**Judy Trotti**

University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, TX

### Abstract

*Graphic novels appeal to children of all ages and may be especially beneficial to English Language Learners (ELL) and struggling readers. Considering the popularity of graphic novels as something hot in 2012, we advocate the use of graphic novels to help students successfully comprehend, infer, and think critically. The challenge for teachers is to provide young readers the tools they need to understand features unique to graphic novels. This chapter addresses trends in children's literature, features of graphic novels, and the teacher's role in utilizing graphic novels in the elementary classroom.*

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According to the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC, 2006), graphic novels are one of the fastest growing categories in book sales and in publishing. Graphic novels differ from comics because comics are generally published as magazines, while graphic novels appear in book format. Schwarz (2006) defines graphic novels as “a longer and more artful version of the comic book bound as a ‘real’ book” (p. 58). Graphic novels appeal to expanded audiences and span across all genres. The popularity of graphic novels is attributed to many factors; one factor is that they appeal to the visual learner because they combine images with text to increase comprehension (Hassett & Schieble, 2007). Perhaps another factor in their popularity is that their combination of text and image is similar to that of film. There is interchange between the two as “film technique informs graphic novels and in turn, many filmmakers base their work on comics or graphic novels” (NCAC, 2006, p. 2). This chapter addresses trends in children's literature, features of graphic novels, and the teacher's role in utilizing graphic novels in the elementary classroom.

### Recent Trends

Due to the rise in popularity of graphic novels, many well-known children's books, including classics, are now available in graphic novel format (Bickers, 2007). For example, some familiar works that are now available as graphic novels include classics such as Jack London's *Call of the Wild* (1903) and Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877). A recent trend in publishing involves best-selling children's and young adult novels being reproduced in a graphic novel version. Examples include the bestselling novel *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan

(2005) and Stephanie Meyer's bestselling novel, *Twilight* (2005). In addition, the Newbery award winning book, *The Tale of Despereaux* (DiCamillo, 2003), became available in a graphic novel in 2008. Old favorites are also being reproduced into graphic novels. *The Boxcar Children*, written by Gertrude Chandler Warner and originally published in 1942, became available in graphic novel form in 2009. Also, in updated graphic novel stories, readers can find characters from old favorites such as the *Nancy Drew* series and *The Hardy Boys* series, both originally created by Edward Stratemeyer.

With this new trend in children's literature come challenges and opportunities for classroom teachers and students of all ages. The challenge for teachers is to ensure young readers are provided the tools they need to understand the unique features of graphic novels. The opportunities for teachers are multiple, as graphic novels can be utilized instructionally in a variety of ways to increase comprehension skills of young readers.

### **Features of Graphic Novels**

While graphic novels are not new forms of text, they have features that are not typical of conventional texts. The unique features of graphic novels call for increased attention from teachers and students in today's classroom. According to Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, and Wilson (2011), graphic novels have images and structures that provide support for navigating texts. Storylines can develop in both the text and illustrations simultaneously. While the text structure is motivational to many readers, elementary students do not automatically recognize ways pictures and text inform each other; therefore, instruction maybe necessary to enhance meaning. Since graphic novels evolved from comic books, the use of panels is implemented similarly. With limited space in panels, efficient readers must be equally attentive to text and pictures. Panels are usually rectangular in shape. Some panels are larger than others to give importance to a particular box, while others may have angled lines strategically placed to show action.

Dialogue in graphic novels is generally integrated through speech bubbles read from top to bottom and left to right within a panel. Panels are read from left to right across the page and top to bottom. Thoughts of characters are similarly displayed; however, they are unique in that the bubble is connected to the character through smaller bubbles symbolic of thought. Narration boxes and captions are generally inserted in a panel as rectangles containing text at the top or bottom of a panel. It is important for students to differentiate between dialogues, thoughts, and captions so that meaning is preserved.

Another graphic novel feature that may need to be explicitly addressed with young readers is the use of color. Colored pictures in graphic novels often indicate particular mood changes in the storyline. In *Babymouse: Cupcake Tycoon* (Holm & Holm, 2010), the color of pink is used to denote a dream or a flashback. The story begins on pink pages with the main character, Babymouse, in a mansion being served by a butler. When the page color changes from pink to white, the reader finds Babymouse back in school being served lunch in the cafeteria.

While this particular series is a popular choice, many children need scaffolding to understand the importance of color to the storylines.

The use of onomatopoeia is a literary device used abundantly in graphic novels. It is not unusual to see words such as *BAM!* and *CRASH!* used to express emotion and excitement. As Percy Jackson is fighting the minotaur in *The Lightning Thief* (Riordan, 2005), onomatopoeia such as *KRRKRACK*, *CRUNCH*, *MWOOROOOR*, *RAAAARRRRR*, and *SNAP* are used along with pictures to show how Percy defeats the minotaur. Since the text is shortened in graphic novels, onomatopoeia provides readers with a sense of adventure that might be otherwise explained in paragraphical form in the original version of the novel.

Informed educators understand the importance of incorporating student interest into instruction. Considering the popularity of graphic novels as *HOT in 2012*, student interest can be exacerbated by providing them with tools to be successful. Teachers can use read-alouds to assist students in reading graphic novels. For example, *Little Detective Blue* (Metzger, 2011) integrates well-known characters from children's nursery rhymes to explore a new story delivered in graphic form. As the story is read-aloud, teachers can model the directionality of text as well as attention to pictures. *Babymouse* (Holm & Holm, 2010) would be appropriate to share with a small group since the book itself would be difficult to view as a whole group. Use of color to depict mood and setting can be explained so that students are ready to tackle the dialogue as they read and interpret the flashbacks indicated by color. Graphic novels are also available for older elementary students, adolescents, and adults. Teachers of upper elementary students may examine *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (Riordan, Venditt, Futaki, & Villarrubia, 2010) to point out both the use of onomatopoeia and shapes of panels that affect story comprehension.

### **Instructional Uses of Graphic Novels**

Due to their high interest level, graphic novels are recommended as motivating reading material for struggling readers (Schwarz, 2002). Duke, Pearson, Strachan, and Billman (2011) suggest that students' motivation is enhanced by contexts, materials, and tasks that catch their attention. In addition, they support the idea that motivation is highly correlated to learning and reading comprehension. Other benefits for the struggling reader include shorter text, visual features, and a gradual release from picture books to text-only literature (Gorman, 2003). According to Carter (2007), through the use of graphic novels in the English classroom, educators may move away from a *one size fits all* literacy instruction.

Teachers of English language learners (ELLs) are charged with the task of making content comprehensible (Echevarria, Short, & Vogt, 2008). This may be accomplished through visuals, texts, and assignments that are modified for ELLs (Echevarria & Graves, 1997). Graphic novels provide both a differentiated text and visual support for ELLs. While native English speakers and ELLs may need experiences of and instruction on reading and understanding graphic novels, ELLs are particularly likely to benefit from the combination of limited text and increased visual support through pictures. Another useful tool is the use of speech bubbles that help ELLs determine which character is doing the speaking in the story. ELLs may have

difficulty understanding descriptive passages of text whereas the graphic novel *shows* the descriptive elements. Graphic novels enable readers to match pictures with text, and this is useful as a comprehension aid for ELLs.

Graphic novels span many genres and can be included as supplemental reading across the disciplines. Teachers may use a graphic novel such as *Seed, Sprout, Fruit: An Apple Tree Life Cycle* (Knudsen, 2011) when studying plants in science. Historical fiction is available in graphic novel format. The American Heroes series highlights Amelia Earhart in *Free in the Skies* (Burleigh, 2003). In addition, Helfand's (2011) *The Wright Brothers* provides biographical information about Orville and Wilbur's lives. American Graphic has published biographies about Robert E. Lee, Elvis, Houdini, Bambino, and Malcolm X as graphic novels.

Instructional applications of graphic novels are not limited to struggling readers and English learners. They provide opportunities for higher level thinking appropriate for all learners. For example, teachers can use graphic novels for comparing/contrasting activities. The practice of comparing text to movies is not new in education. Lessons and information on comparing texts to movies is provided on The International Reading Association's website, <http://www.readwritethink.org/>. The theory behind the practice is that students are asked to think critically in relationship to the stories they see as they move beyond basic analysis to more sophisticated comparison skills. The same practice can be implemented with the use of graphic novels. Instead of comparing a book to a movie, children can compare a written novel with its graphic counterpart and use critical thinking skills to identify similarities and differences between the original text and the graphic novel version. Students can compare similarities and contrast differences between basic literary elements such as characters, plot, and setting.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Graphic novels are a tool that teachers can use to promote reading. They are available in genres and difficulty levels appropriate for students of various reading abilities, ages, and interests. As educators become more familiar with and encouraging of graphic novels as a way to promote reading, consideration should be given to features, that when understood, can help students successfully comprehend, infer, and think critically.

Struggling readers and ELL may find success with graphic novels because of the embedded context, shorter reading passages, and high interest. However, graphic novels can be used with all learners. They provide opportunities for readers to compare/contrast, analyze, and predict outcomes. Importantly, students are choosing to read graphic novels. Teacher support of this trend motivates students as readers who can make choices about their own learning. While graphic novels have a valuable place on school bookshelves, they may also be a conduit to other pieces of literature children can enjoy.

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