

“READING OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE”:
HOW SECONDARY STUDENTS EXPERIENCE GRAPHIC NOVEL INSTRUCTION
IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

BY

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ABSTRACT

Within the current educational climate, many adolescents, particularly at the secondary level, struggle to achieve literacy proficiency. One factor that may be contributing to these poor proficiency levels is the curriculum, particularly the type of texts being used to develop literacy in school. These materials tend to reflect traditional notions of text that are believed to develop skills necessary to succeed on standardized assessments. Many English Language Arts classrooms continue to privilege traditional literary texts and linguistic modes of meaning despite the fact that developing the skills to read certain alternative texts, like graphic novels, can make students better, more engaged readers. The graphic novel can also be used to improve proficiency by providing opportunities for students to develop multimodal reading and critical literacy skills. Though researchers continue to highlight the educational benefits of graphic novels, the general theoretical literature has yet to explore how readers adjust to the affordances of this type of text or how instruction impacts this learning process. Using an embedded case study model, this study documented how a twelfth-grade class studied four graphic novels that had been incorporated in their ELA course. The data were derived from multiple sources including observations, interviews, artifacts, and documents. Findings for this study suggest that readers may require instruction specific to graphic novels in order to fully access the unique textual affordances and maximize the learning potential of this kind of text. This research also indicates that graphic novels may be better suited for a nontraditional instructional approach, such as a multiliteracies pedagogy, that more fully addresses its multimodal and pluralistic features. This study also suggests that instructors working with such materials receive special training to ensure that their instructional model is appropriate for graphic novels and to help support student learning with text-specific strategies.

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CHAPTER ONE

Almost none of my students liked to read. This was the reality I faced on my first day as an English Language Arts (ELA) middle school teacher. Having spent all summer preparing lessons on literary classics, I was devastated that so many of my students were not only uninterested in reading, but struggled a great deal with it. For weeks, I tried to come up with innovative ways to get them more engaged in reading. Nothing seemed to work. Then, one day during independent reading, I introduced a student to a graphic novel from our literacy center. Word quickly spread that it was a “cool” book, and before long students were clamoring to read it. This gave me an idea. What if I incorporated a graphic novel into my official ELA curriculum?

After some persuasion, the administration agreed to the experiment, but only if I could fund the project entirely on my own. Sharing this challenge with my students, we decided to try to make it happen. We scoured every public library in Brooklyn in search of copies of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* (Spiegelman, 1986). We also raised money from family and friends to buy copies of the books, and even managed to get a few donated from local booksellers. Once every student had a copy, we spent a great deal of time reading the text and learning how comics convey narrative using words and images. It seemed that for the first time in my classroom, students were enthusiastic about reading. The change was palpable enough, even beyond my own classroom, that the school leaders decided to allow graphic novels to be used to fulfill students’ mandated reading requirements.

Once we finished *Maus*, we moved on to traditional print-based literature. In subsequent units, I noticed that many students seemed more engaged in reading; some

appeared to comprehend story structures and literary devices better. While I cannot say with certainty that these improvements were a direct result of our graphic novel unit, I do believe that my students' interest in these materials made them more active readers, and as a result, better readers (Duke & Pearson, 2002). To encourage this newfound passion for comics, and to keep expanding my students' literary repertoire, I purchased several graphic novel series for our class library, including Jeff Smith's *Bone* and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*. Additionally, I offered copies of traditional texts in graphic form for interested and struggling readers. Soon, teachers began complaining that students were reading during their classes. For the first time in several years, students showed slight improvement on their standardized reading assessments; some even began participating in after-school book clubs. It seemed that broadening the curriculum to include some alternative texts helped expand students' perceptions of text and school-based reading.

When I chose to include comics in my classroom, it was a spontaneous, somewhat desperate decision born out of my students' lack of interest in the curriculum. At that point I was by no means an expert of the format; I simply saw comics (as many other researchers and educators do) as a youth-friendly, "conduit to harder reading" (Krashen, 2005, p. 2; see also McTaggart, 2005; Mendez, 2004). However, while reading *Maus*, I began to recognize that this kind of text has its own unique affordances and could potentially be used for much more than to scaffold struggling readers and engage resistant ones. Over the years, as I became more proficient with teaching comics, I wondered how students experience and adapt to these textual differences. Therefore, in this study I decided to investigate this question. I did so by documenting how a general education twelfth-grade class experienced the unique affordances of graphic novels. I

also explored how instruction shapes students' understanding of this type of text. In this introduction, I contextualize my study by discussing some of the challenges involved in getting students to achieve reading proficiency. I will also discuss how expanding the curriculum through the inclusion of alternative texts, specifically those situated within youth culture like the graphic novel, can potentially be used to improve proficiency. After establishing the significance of this study, I will conclude this section by presenting my research questions and an overview of the dissertation.

Adolescent Proficiency under NCLB

Current educational statistics indicate that many American students, particularly those at the secondary level, are struggling to achieve reading proficiency. This trend is not only widespread across the country, but appears to be growing. Even as elementary students continue to show improvement on standardized reading assessments (Hock et al., 2009; Lenters, 2006), the scores of middle and high school students have either remained the same as or below 1992 reading levels (NAEP, 2010, 2011). According to the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP), approximately two-thirds of eighth and twelfth-grade students read below the advanced proficient level (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). Of those students, 26% of eighth-graders and 27% of twelfth-graders are below proficient readers (NAEP, 2007). Though recent assessments indicate that eighth-grade reading scores have increased by one point since 2009, only 34% of these students are "at or above the proficient level [and only] 3% are at the advanced reading level" (NAEP, 2011, p. 5). Similarly, though recent twelfth-grade assessments saw a two point increase, these scores are still four points lower than those from 1992. Only 38% percent of twelfth-graders could read at the proficient or advanced reading levels "which

was higher than the percentage in 2005... [but] lower than in 1992” (NAEP, 2010, p. 1). These findings suggest that graduating seniors have made no significant progress in reading performance since 1971 (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009), and despite evidence of slight gains, most are still struggling to achieve reading proficiency (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). Though school demographics have grown increasingly diverse, particularly more Hispanic (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009), and this may have some impact on stubbornly stagnant national achievement indicators, the overall lack of improvement is disappointing. Failure to achieve reading proficiency not only shapes a student’s academic career, but can also have other long-lasting repercussions throughout his or her lifetime. Studies have found that adolescents who do not become proficient readers are more likely to drop out of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Hock et al., 2009), be unemployed (Dagget & Hasselbring, 2007), and spend time in jail (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006).

Challenges Involved in Achieving Adolescent Proficiency under NCLB

One factor that may be contributing to these poor proficiency levels is the curriculum, specifically the type of texts being used to develop literacy in school. Recent research has found that in this age of unprecedented multimedia, most secondary classrooms continue to privilege traditional books and print-based literacy strategies (Alvermann, 2001; Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; McVee, Bailey, & Shanahan, 2008). This approach privileges linguistic modes or a specific “semiotic viewpoint” (Suhor, 1984, p. 248) by emphasizing “design elements... [such as] oral delivery, vocabulary coherence, organization, and genre” (Miller & Borowicz, 2006, p. 8). In contrast, a multimodal approach favors not just the inclusion of non-print texts like digital media,

but also the incorporation of various semiotic systems within the reading process (Miller & Borowicz, 2006). For example, a book can be read via the linguistic mode, wherein only the words are considered, or it can be read via the visual mode with analysis of the “image composition, page layouts, screen formats, spatial positioning of subjects, angles of perception, [and] use of color” (Miller & Borowicz, 2006, p. 8-9; see also Jewitt, 2005). By incorporating various layers of meaning into the formal reading of a text, a multimodal approach can deepen and broaden the reader’s understanding and analysis of the material.

Upholding a linguistically dominant view of literacy does not seem to be helping students; in fact, evidence points to the contrary (Albers, 2003; McVee et al., 2008; Siegel, 1995). Educators who do not address multimodalities in their instruction not only limit their students’ opportunities to construct knowledge, but can also fail to utilize and legitimize their nonacademic literacy interests and expertise in ways that can be pedagogically powerful (Albers, 2003; Jewitt, 2005). In contrast, educators who encourage their students to be multimodal readers, to “make meaning by moving from one sign system to another...and from one modality to another” (McVee et al., 2008, p. 115), “may foster the development of a wide range of cognitive, aesthetic, and psychomotor skills which remain untapped in most traditional classrooms” (Siegel, 1995, p. 461). As technology continues to innovate with new forms of communication, new literacy skills are undoubtedly required. Reading, both critically and multimodally, has become essential in preparing students for the “pragmatics of [their] working, civic, and private lives” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60). Although there have been numerous calls to expand the traditional ELA curriculum to reflect contemporary

conceptions of literacy to include diverse text modes, most teachers continue to favor working with traditional texts using traditional linguistic-based strategies (Alvermann, 2001; McVee et al., 2008).

Many teachers may be resistant to expanding the range of their curriculum because of the demands imposed on them by high-stakes testing. While schools have always been accountable to the local communities they serve, the federal mandates stipulated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have pushed performance standards to the center stage of the national discourse about achievement. Under these more rigid guidelines, educators not only have specific material they are required to cover, but department exams, state assessments, and national evaluations to prepare for. Because there are so many stakeholders and often so much is at stake, standardized assessments tend to dominate instructional time (Manzo, 2001; Parmar & Krinsky, in press). For many educators operating in this tense environment, veering away from a curriculum that is not concretely and clearly oriented to the tests is simply not an option; there is little time or interest in instructional materials that do not explicitly address test objectives (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Reback, Rockoff, & Schwartz, 2011) or lead directly to better test performance (Phelps, 2011).

This trend of “teaching to the test” has been found in classrooms across the United States (Manzo, 2001). A national study conducted by *Education Week* found that 79% of teachers reported spending a great deal of their instructional time preparing students for standardized assessments (Manzo, 2001). The pressures associated with test-taking can ultimately discourage teachers from innovating or diversifying their curriculum. This reluctance was confirmed by my own experience while searching for a

site to conduct this study. I was repeatedly told by school administrators that they either did not have enough class time to work with graphic novels or that graphic novels were not legitimate instructional tools. It took me over two years to find a single school in the region with a course that included graphic novels, and it is offered only as a senior elective after all the high school proficiency exams have been completed. Alternative materials, like graphic novels, are not widely used because many educators believe it will distract students from the type of learning measured by standardized tests (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Schwarz, 2006). Yet, if the research suggests that such texts actually help engage youth and that this engagement encourages reading, then such materials can ultimately lead to better academic performance (Carter, 2007; Krashen, 2005; Schwarz, 2006). Despite these potential benefits, the current NCLB-driven approach, which focuses on meeting preset benchmarks, discourages educators from taking such curricular risks (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Phelps, 2011; Reback et al., 2011). In doing so, it also supports a traditional perspective of literacy as a “page-bound, official...[and] carefully restricted project—restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 61).

NCLB also dismisses the growing body of research that supports the idea that literacy is not only skill-based, but embedded within rich discourse communities and complex socio-cultural contexts (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Dyson, 2003; Gee, 2011; Freire, [1974] 2005; Street, 2003). Instead of focusing solely on the technicalities of literacy, educators should include texts that engage students by promoting critical thinking. In order for young people to have healthy civic lives, they must spend time in

school developing higher-order critical thinking skills (Parmar & Krinsky, in press; Schwarz, 2007). The development of this type of awareness, which is generally referred to as critical literacy, helps prevent a herd mentality and encourages students to enrich our democracy by asking questions, detecting prejudice and inequality, seeking alternative points of view, and engaging with difficult social issues (Freire, [1973] 2005; Kinchloe, 2005a, 2005b; Schwarz, 2007; Thomas, 2010). To foster critical literacy, educators need to turn their classrooms into community spaces where members are safe to learn and challenge themselves in unscripted ways. By engaging in this type of learning, students acquire the skills that are fundamental to living a responsible civic life (Dewey, 1916; Parmar & Krinsky, in press; Schwarz, 2007).

Youth Literacies: Adolescent Proficiency outside the Classroom

Although the NAEP results are discouraging, they do not necessarily prove that contemporary adolescents are uninvolved in literacy practices. In fact, an unprecedented number of young adults are engaged with text in innovative ways; they read manga, send text messages, read blogs, write raps, use and create websites to seek and report information, and tweet throughout the day (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Gee, 2003; Schwarz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006; Weinstein, 2006; Williams, 2008). These texts are non-school sanctioned and involve literacies that students engage in outside of classroom for non-academic purposes. Typically engagement with them is referred to as “youth literacies” because of the large number of young people who consume, produce, and negotiate meaning with them (Alvermann & Xu, 2003).

Much research has been conducted documenting adolescents’ interactions with non-school texts including graffiti tagging (Moje, 2000), video gaming (Gee, 2003), and

rapping (Weinstein, 2006). Each of these studies reached the same basic conclusion that “despite the panic over low test scores, low standards, and low skill levels, children and teenagers from across class and ethnic or racial categories eagerly read and write when they see a purpose to it and when they get something out of it” (Weinstein, 2006, p. 272-273). For example, Weinstein (2006) found that a group of low-achieving students in urban Chicago composed complex rap lyrics because it gave them pleasure. These students, who typically resisted writing in school, wrote extensively and challengingly outside of the classroom. Though talented and willing to work hard, participants in Weinstein’s focus group, like many other secondary students, found little joy in academically-based literacy activities and as a result did poorly in school. Weinstein (2006) argues that this is because:

pleasure takes time—time for creative processes to unfold; time to experiment and fail and revise and try again; time to linger, to think, to talk, to share. When teachers and administrators—indeed, whole districts and states—are focused on raising test scores, that time quickly starts to seem like a luxury. Yet, in deciding that we cannot afford the time that pleasure—that immersion in the processes of learning—requires, we are, however inadvertently, making a much larger decision: that we don’t believe that different ways of thinking about, understanding, and engaging with the world are either possible, useful, or desirable. (p. 274)

Weinstein’s research provides evidence supporting the long-held belief that engaged learners are better students. By incorporating certain texts that are embedded within youth culture, teachers can revitalize their lessons because if the work is “interesting to young people, they’ll be excited about learning” (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p. 331). Duncan-Andrade argues that “students want a classroom culture that reflects expanded definitions of literacy [and] instruction that emphasizes more meaningful learning activities that allow them to develop academic literacy skills that are transferable

to their daily lives” (p. 331). By including such materials in the classroom, teachers can draw on students’ expertise and interests in nonacademic texts while encouraging them to develop new skills (Albers, 2003; Jewitt, 2005). By transforming learning, such activities would not only benefit students academically, but impact how they interact with text outside of school (Jewitt, 2005).

Despite the academic potential of such materials to engage students, few are recognized or even acceptable to use within the school community, as they do not fit into the narrow, school-based definition of literacy (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Gainer, 2007; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Koss & Teale, 2009). Adults tend to think of youth culture as being either too violent or too sexually explicit to warrant inclusion in the classroom (Brenner, 2006; Gainer, 2007; Williams, 2007). This belief, though not entirely unfounded, is an overgeneralization as it clumps all youth-related interests and activities into one nebulous category. In truth, youth culture encompasses a tremendously diverse range of interests, identities, activities, and associations (Rice, 1996). Among adults, teachers should be the first to recognize the instructional potential of youth culture because they, of all adult professions, have the most deliberate and sustained exposure and interactions with young people. Yet unfortunately, most fail to utilize the opportunities their close proximity to youth affords them because they, like many parents, are poorly informed and dismiss all youth culture as being deviant and antithetical to academic goals (Brenner, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Mendez, 2004). By taking this position, teachers shut a valuable window and miss an opportunity to connect with their students and understand their interests, practices, and skills (Alvermann, & Hagood,

2000; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Gainer, 2007; Hall, 2012; Parmar & Krinsky, in press; Williams, 2007).

Furthermore, recent research has shown that students draw on youth culture while learning in school. For example, Hall (2012) observed that “students used movies, video games, and comic books to inform their interpretations of academic texts and to respond to questions posed by their peers” (p. 302). Interestingly, she found that these resources were accessed independently, without being prompted by the teacher. This suggests that students will connect academic learning to non-school sources even if such texts are unmentioned or unwelcomed in the classroom. In Hall’s study students not only accessed this material, but also used it as “indisputable evidence to support their interpretations about social studies” (Hall, 2012, p. 302). Perhaps because teachers did not sanction or teach them how to critically read these kinds of texts, they raised no questions about the validity or reliability of youth culture, and missed an opportunity to critically examine their own and school-based literacy practices (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Hall, 2012; Steinkhuehler, 2010).

Teachers are perhaps encouraged to disregard the benefits of youth culture as a result of their training and positioning within the classroom. In most traditional ELA classrooms, the learning process is a one-way street; the teacher possesses the required knowledge and is trained to invite, encourage, and even cajole students into attaining it (Weinstein, 2002). Often, student voice is not used to inform or shape instructional learning opportunities (Cook-Sather, 2009; Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Kane & Maw, 2005; Thiessen, 2006). However, scholars argue that students should be given more agency, more responsibility, and more ownership in their education (Fine, et al., 2006;

Gunter & Thomson, 2007; Kincheloe, 2007). They argue that teachers ought to rescind some control and instead co-construct knowledge with their students, working together, as equal stakeholders, to make sense of learning (Kincheloe, 2007). This approach supports a dialogic style of pedagogy where all stakeholders commit to ‘translating’ the different languages (or interests and needs) of all those involved in the educational process (Cook-Sather, 2009).

One way teachers can engage in dialogic pedagogy is by including youth literacies in the classroom. For example, by validating different conceptualizations of literacy, teachers and students can engage in a conversation about “what constitutes meaningful knowledge” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. xi). In this way alternative curricular materials would not supplant the literary canon or over-romanticize youth culture; instead, such texts would serve as a source of engagement. By “blur[ring] the distinctions between high and popular culture, by rewriting the boundaries of the so-called disciplines, by linking learning to the revitalization of public life...[such blended instruction can] redefine...the terrain of popular culture as part of a wider struggle for democracy” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. xii). Doing so, ultimately gives meaning to all different kinds of literacy interests and practices. In this way, alternative texts like the graphic novel can be used as an educational tool through which students can critically examine both their personal and academic practices (Gainer, 2007). This could also potentially expand students’ perceptions of school learning and help teachers recognize the intellectual richness of nonacademic texts. Using alternative texts to expose the voices, histories, and experiences of marginalized groups would allow students to critically ‘read’ the world while helping them develop the tools with which to ultimately rewrite it (Friere & Giroux,

1989; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993). Unfortunately, most ELA teachers ignore the rich literacies their students already possess and do not resituate them within an academic context (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Weinstein, 2002). In this way, many teachers do not engage in a dialogic pedagogy with their students despite evidence that establishing such a learning environment has the potential to be beneficial to both parties (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Weinstein, 2002).

The Graphic Novel: A Multimodal, Critical, Youth Literacy

The graphic novel, a kind of youth literacy, is easily included in the typical ELA classroom because, like a traditional book, it is bound, lengthy, and often quite sophisticated. At the same time, graphic novels are not typical print-books and are instead part of the tradition of cartoons, comics, and comic books (Eisner, 2008; Wright, 2003). Though this will be expanded on in the literature review, graphic narratives employ the comics format which means that they build meaning by using words and pictures within a system of panels and gutters (the empty space between panels). This study will employ both the terms ‘graphic novel’ and ‘graphic narrative’ interchangeably and use the word ‘comics’ to refer to the interior structure of the text. Though they employ the same basic format, graphic narratives are not serialized comic books. As “stand-alone” books, graphic novels are a new breed of text that pushes the format in new directions (Burdge, 2006), covering a range of topics and presenting them through a complex interplay of genres (Bucher & Manning, 2004). In this way, the term ‘graphic novel’ is quite misleading as it does not actually signify fictional content (Bucher & Manning, 2004). In fact, all the texts used in this study are nonfiction, although this designation is somewhat contentious and oversimplified.

Using words and pictures to convey a story is an old practice, but the graphic narrative, in its current form, is a relatively new genre that continues to outsell traditional comic books, even in the current recession (MacDonald & Reid, 2011). This growth, attributed to an increasing number of adult readers, indicates an attitude shift as comics have generally been thought of as juvenile junk literature (Gorman, 2003). Additionally, Hollywood's adaptation of several popular graphic novels (such as *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Amazing Spiderman*) undoubtedly boosts their popularity and helps attract new fans. Though it should not be presumed that all adolescents know how to read this kind of text (Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, & Wilson, 2011), many American teenagers are aware of different elements of comics, like its unique format or popular characters whether from seeing the latest Marvel installment in the movie theater or by reading the funnies in the Sunday paper. In these and other ways, comics have moved beyond the page and permeated mainstream American culture (Wright, 2003).

Although graphic novels have distinguished themselves from the traditional serialized comic book, they, like comics, often speak to the unique experiences of youth, especially in times of war, rebellion, immigration, and other decisive historic moments like September 11th and Hurricane Katrina (Schwarz, 2007). Many of these works also deal with themes commonly found in young adult literature such as identity, sexuality, depression, substance abuse, family relationships, friendship, and love. In this way, graphic narratives, though situated within the tradition of comics, have also pushed beyond it. The "flying tights" epics typical of popular comics are not all that common in the graphic novel; instead, this kind of text is noted for its realistic and even dark

depictions of life (Brenner, 2006) and “prides itself on its edginess” (Seyfried, 2008, p. 45).

Though comics are generally presumed to be easy to read (Gorman, 2003), reading a graphic novel is not a straightforward process. Meaning is not contained in either the words or the images, but somewhere in the marriage between the two (Sabin, 1993; Versaci, 2001). Unlike traditional texts, graphic novels are able to quite literally “put a human face on a subject [by] blend[ing] words and pictures so that, in addition to reading text, readers can ‘see’ the characters through the illustrations” (Versaci, 2001, p. 62). Additionally, the reader must be able to discern between the interwoven layers of narrative that are embedded within the panels, the layout, and even the margins (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005). Graphic novels also violate some of the most deeply-held beliefs about text as they are not necessarily read left-to-right or even centered on the page. Some graphic novels, like *Watchmen* (Moore, 1986), are also discursive in nature, meaning they incorporate a variety of text types such as journal entries and newspaper articles within the primary narrative form. Such hybrid material requires the reader to be aware of and able to navigate a variety of texts that together communicate and build the narrative (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). For these reasons, the graphic novel can present as incredibly dense and opaque texts, especially to the novice reader (Risko et al., 2011).

In addition to its unique textual features, some graphic novels are also well-suited to prepare students for the demands of democratic living (Dyson, 1997; Carter, 2007; Schwarz, 2007), by asking “questions citizens need to be asking and researching, questions about war, genocide, stereotyping, poverty, and justice” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 3; see also Lalik & Oliver, 2007). For this reason:

Graphic novels may promote discussion in more lively and immediate ways than most textbooks, and they offer points of view often unexpressed in the usual curriculum resources. Moreover, as a new medium, the graphic novel invites media literacy education which includes information and visual literacy. The unique combination of print and pictures opens up possibilities for looking at new content and for examining how diverse kinds of texts make meaning to readers. (Schwarz, 2007, p. 3)

In this way, some graphic novels can be used to teach students to read multimodally while also helping them to examine important “social-political issues like the environment, criminal justice, and consumerism” (Schwarz, 2007, p. 10; see also Thomas, 2010; Versaci, 2001).

In conclusion, a re-conceptualization of youth literacies as rich, valuable, and challenging texts would give teachers an avenue through which to fully embrace student-friendly texts, encourage increased engagement with reading, and potentially improve student achievement. Expanding the curriculum while developing both traditional and new literacy skills could potentially offer students increased opportunities to explore diverse perspectives and enrich the traditional cannon while building bridges between in- and out-of-school literacies. By including what have been traditionally nonacademic texts, teachers can scaffold, strengthen, and develop their students’ existent skills while making school reading a more meaningful experience (Faulkner, 2005). In utilizing marginalized materials such as graphic novels to engage in dialogic pedagogy, teachers could also “capture adolescent know-how and evolving expertise” (Faulkner, 2005, p. 117; see also Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack, 2004). In doing so, they could potentially open a window into the world of young people because such texts “have spoken to youth’s concerns and sensibilities with consistency and directness that few, if any, other entertainment media can claim” (Wright, 2003, p. xvi). While it may be more difficult to

incorporate some of the contemporary literacies that more and more adolescents interact with, the graphic novel is readily accessible and classroom-friendly. Its comics format, book-like appearance, and sophisticated content makes it a rich educational resource that can enhance the typical secondary classroom and ultimately improve student learning.

Purpose of the Study

In the field of literacy research, numerous studies have explored how the graphic novel can be used as an instructional tool to support particular student populations. These studies have included English Language Learners, at-risk youths, struggling and reluctant readers and writers, the deaf, and honors students (Boatright, 2010; Calo, 2010; Chun, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Lawrence, McNeal, & Yildiz., 2009; Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009). Whether in a pull-out setting, a voluntary reading group, or an after-school club, all of these studies have been conducted in a specialized setting, outside of the general education classroom. Researchers continue to call on teachers to use graphic novels to develop comprehension, writing quality, critical literacy, and even build vocabulary, but to date there has been no formal study documenting the use of graphic novels in a general education high school setting. There is also little work exploring how students adjust to the unique textual affordances of this type of text or how instruction impacts their understanding of graphic narratives. Filling this void, this study explored what happened when a twelfth-grade English Language Arts teacher incorporated graphic novels into her curriculum. Documenting this process from the students' perspectives, the research questions were:

1. How do students respond to the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives?
2. How does instruction shape students' understanding of graphic novels?

This research sheds light on how students adjust to the distinctive reading landscape of the graphic narrative and provides a deeper understanding of what reading this kind of text entails. It also explores how instruction impacts students in this learning process, indicating that using graphic narratives in the classroom may necessitate a particular pedagogical orientation or instructional strategies. In the next chapter, I will present an overview of the literature, highlighting three related areas of inquiry: multiliteracies, youth literacies, and the graphic narrative. In the third chapter, I will elaborate on the research design of this study. In the fourth chapter, I will present findings related to the first research question, highlighting students' experiences with the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives. In the fifth chapter, I will present findings related to the second research question, discussing the impact of instruction on student learning. The sixth and final chapter will summarize the major findings of this study and situate it within the existing research.

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CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The research that informs this study comes from three areas of inquiry, each of which will be discussed in this literature review. The first section introduces multiliteracies and discusses how this theory challenges more traditional conceptions of reading by asserting that literacy is socially constructed and multimodal. The second section focuses specifically on literacies embedded within youth culture and addresses the educational potential of including such materials within the mainstream ELA curriculum. The third and final section focuses on the graphic novel and explores its history, format, and audience; it also presents research on how such texts can be used to support comprehension, critical literacy, vocabulary, writing, and reading engagement. This overview will demonstrate that, to date, there is no research documenting how readers respond to the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives or how the use of such texts impacts traditional ELA instruction and student learning.

Multiliteracies

Coined by a group of international scholars that met in New London, New Hampshire, the term multiliteracies encompasses a set of assumptions about literacy and a particular approach to pedagogy given those assumptions. The term ‘multiliteracies’ speaks to “the multiplicity of communication channels and media... [and] the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). The New London Group, the initial multiliteracies theorists, asserts that the purpose of education is to “ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, economic, and community life” (1996, para. 2). They argue that this goal has been traditionally accomplished through a “page-bound, official, and standardized” form of literacy (para. 1). In other words, an autonomous model of literacy that purports

that “literacy in itself—autonomously—will have effects on other social and cognitive practices” (Street, 2003, p. 73). Practitioners of multiliteracies dismiss this model arguing that it too “formalized, monolingual, [and] monocultural,” to appropriately prepare students for the literacy demands of the 21st century (New London Group, 1996, para. 1). In this way, multiliteracies rejects the belief that literacy is a set of discrete cognitive abilities “that is ‘given’ neutrally” (Street, 2003, p. 78). Instead, practitioners of this theory argue that literacy has become an increasingly complex and globalized phenomenon with “multiple languages, multiple Englishes, and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community, and national boundaries” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 6). Learning to communicate across these boundaries requires that students be exposed to and embrace the rich linguistic diversity of the interconnected world, becoming “active participants in social change... [and] designers of social futures” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 7).

In addition to this global perspective, multiliteracies also challenges conceptions of literacy at the textual level. Dismissing a “formal, standard, written national language” (Cope & Kalantzis, p. 6), multiliteracies acknowledges the different semiotic systems and the multiplicity of modes of meaning making. This commitment to understanding how different modes interact with and impact reading is often referred to as multimodalities. Though this is not a new concept (Heath & Wollach, 2008; Jewitt, 2005), multimodalities has become an especially prevalent area of literacy research as more and more people continue to engage with such texts (e.g. websites, apps, GPS, videogames) on a regular basis (Moje, 2009). These new technologies introduce new channels of communication and by doing so, impact the way language is used and how meaning is derived. They also

oftentimes expose users to an international audience. For example, in playing massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) like *World of Warcraft*, users not only manipulate various semiotic systems to play effectively, but interact with players from across the globe. Responding to this changing literacy landscape, Cope & Kalantzis (2000) argue that there “cannot be one set of standards or skills that constitutes the ends of literacy learning, however taught” (p. 6). For this reason schools, which have long favored an alphabetic or linguistic mode of learning, need to expose students to more language diversity and teach them how to successfully navigate and draw meaning from different semiotic systems because these abilities will ultimately prepare them for the “pragmatics of [their] working, civic, and private lives” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60; see also Jewitt, 2005).

A Multiliteracies Pedagogy

Teachers who encourage modal dexterity help their students develop complex literacy skills because they recognize the dynamism of representational resources and are able to manipulate them to achieve various purposes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Such abilities could potentially help learners use one mode to make sense of another. For example in a related study, Smagorinsky & Coppock (1995) documented a group of students who used dance to help comprehend a text. Similarly, some educators claim that the strong visual imagery found in graphic narratives scaffolds comprehension and can help struggling readers understand what they are reading (Crawford, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2007; McTaggart, 2005). Despite the advantages to multimodal reading and the fact that many students interact with such diverse modalities of text at home, many schools continue to favor traditional print-based books and teach them through a very narrow

semiotic lens. In doing so, educators not only ignore opportunities for relevant 21st century learning, but invalidate many of students' literacy interests and strengths (Albers, 2003).

Viewing a text through a lens of multimodality opens up the reading experience by giving the reader more ways to interact with the material (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). In addition to presenting multiple layers of meaning, the reader must actively consolidate the different modes in order to make sense of the text. For example, reading a typical book multimodally requires the reader to interpret both the printed words and the visual elements of the text like its typeface, layout, and graphics. In this way, reading a text multimodally can either be engaging and scaffold the reader (Crawford, 2004) or be distracting and hinder comprehension (Risko et al., 2011). While all texts can be read multimodally, certain types of texts, like comics, inherently require the reader to draw on multiple modes to make sense of the material. To do this successfully, readers must have repeated exposure, practice, and even training with reading those particular texts (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). In this way, multimodal reading can be challenging and require a host of specialized skills that can be difficult to attain.

In addition to developing multimodal reading, a pedagogy of multiliteracies seeks to expose the social, political, and economic messages that are embedded in text (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Dyson, 1997; Luke, 1997). Just as a print book can be read multimodally, similarly a traditional text can be viewed through a critical literacy lens as a "physical live artifact with a story and a system behind [it]" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 37). Critical literacy is an instructional approach rooted within critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education founded on critical theory (Giroux, 2010; Kincheloe, 2004).

Critical theorists generally address the interplay of culture, text, and knowledge, and explore how these forms are produced, reproduced, and appropriated within power structures (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Grossberg, 1994; Kellner, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Critical pedagogy is an instructional approach that helps students learn to examine how these inequalities manifest in everyday educational practices “to help students develop consciousness of freedom, [to] recognize authoritarian tendencies, and [to] connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, para. 1). Critical pedagogy rejects complacency and cynicism and instead strives to inspire students to look at “what is” to determine “what could be,” and to find a way to move from “where we are” to “where we want to be” (Parmar, 2009, p. 9). Rooted in critical pedagogy, “critical literacy requires a ‘reading of cultures,’ around, behind, underneath, alongside, after, and within the text” (Luke, Comber, and O’Brien, 1996, p. 35). Applying a critical-literacy lens to reading sheds light on sociocultural choices, norms, conventions, understandings, and experiences (Browett, 2007; Parmar & Krinsky, in press). Developing literacy skills through a critical pedagogy can help students explore the social, economic, and political dimensions of a text, and ultimately be used to promote student agency and growth.

In working with multimodal texts, students need to have opportunities in school to develop literacy skills by employing critical media literacy. In contrast to the critical analysis traditionally employed in ELA classes, critical media literacy, which is also rooted in critical pedagogy, is particularly responsive to multimodal forms of texts and can be used to critique multiple layers of meaning. Many scholars have defined critical media literacy as the ability to access, decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce

communication in a variety of media forms, including print and non-print texts (McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, & Reilly, 1995; Alvermann, et al., 1999; Potter, 2005). According to Kellner and Share (2009), critical media literacy is used to:

critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power. It involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media. (p. 4)

As an instructional stance, critical media literacy is adaptive to mass media and can help bring critical awareness to materials that students are intimately familiar with like television programs, billboard advertisements, and popular music (Alvermann, et al., 1999; Kellner & Share, 2005). In utilizing this “semiotic approach to critical media literacy, it is possible to treat all forms of popular culture as signs—as a language through which meaning is communicated using words, images, and objects of everyday life” (Alvermann, et al., 1999, p. 10). By including such materials in the classroom and working to decode them, educators can help their students become more critical consumers and producers of media and in doing so enrich their everyday literacy practices (Kellner & Share, 2005).

By incorporating youth culture in the classroom and analyzing it through a critical media literacy lens, students work to make the familiar unfamiliar, the known unknown and challenge “what-goes-without-saying” (Barthes, 1998, p. 11; see also Bruce, 1998; Giroux, 1997). This ability to unpack the layers of text is an essential component in today’s literacy instruction as Bruce (1998) explains:

Literacy educators...have the responsibility to make the familiar strange—not only to rethink the uses of technologies, but also to know it again for the first time as we consider where our students may be starting. We must recall what it is like to be a novice or to be less privileged. We need to critically examine what has become commonplace, normalized, and even invisible. In some cases, we may need to depend on our students to navigate the voyage because they may be more expert. (p. 272)

As they train their students to unravel the layers of meaning, teachers using this approach must be careful to avoid a liberating stance that ‘demystifies’ youth culture as a thoughtless commercial entity that is not worthy of intellectual interrogation (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Gainer, 2007). This positioning ultimately discounts and can even destroy the pleasure students derive from interacting with this kind of text (Alvermann et al., 1999; Gainer, 2007). Instead, educators should help their students develop the skills with which to “evaluate media messages... [in order to make] more informed decisions about how to live their lives” (Alvermann et al., 1999, p. 4). In this way, critical media literacy is a self-reflective exercise that “stresses individual differences and multiple reading positions as well as situation-specific critical deconstruction of media texts” (Alvermann et al., 1999, p. 28). In other words, it is a “constant movement back and forth between practice and theory, between celebration and critical analysis, and between language use and language study” (Buckingham, 1993, p. 151).

Though both multimodalities and critical media literacy have become independent areas of research, both concepts are addressed within the multiliteracies pedagogy. This approach is categorized by four interrelated components: *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing*, and *transformed practice*. Designed to “provide ideas and angles with which to supplement what teachers do” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p. 239), the multiliteracies pedagogy is not a step-by-step guide, but rather four dimensions with

which to continuously examine learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000). The first dimension, *situated practice*, is the “immersion in experience [and]...drawing on students’ own lifeworlds for simulations of ‘real-world’ relationships” (p. 244). This involves creating a safe environment for students to engage in learning and actively recruiting their “previous and current experiences, as well as their extra-school communities and discourses, as an integral part of the learning experience” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 33). The second component, *overt instruction*, is the “introduction of explicit metalanguages with which to describe, interpret, [and deconstruct] the design elements of different modes of meaning” (p. 246). This phase is an opportunity for teachers to scaffold learning, to organize and guide practice where such interventions are beneficial to student learning. The third component, *critical framing*, involves “interpreting the social and cultural contexts of particular designs of meaning” (p. 247). This provides students with the opportunity to “stand back from what they are studying and view it critically in relation to its context” (p. 247). Here, teachers help learners “to denaturalize and make strange again what they have learned and mastered” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 34). In the final component, *transformed practice*, learners transfer “meanings and put these to work in other contexts or cultural sites” (p. 248). This entails not only making connections across different areas of learning, but the literal transformation of the student whose learning has caused him or her to see or do things in a new way.

With the pedagogical aim “to develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities” (New London Group, 1996, p. 18), adopting a multiliteracies pedagogy in the classroom diversifies, contextualizes, analyzes, and ultimately, transforms learning. It also expands

traditional notions of text by encouraging a more inclusive learning environment that utilizes students' personal literacy practices while encouraging them to strengthen underdeveloped ones. Additionally, by fostering a critical stance toward text, this approach is designed to make students more aware and adept users of media. As a comprehensive guide, the multiliteracies pedagogy provides educators with the tools through which to access the intellectual richness of nonmainstream texts and utilize such materials for meaningful learning.

Multiliteracies and Youth Culture

Within the field of multiliteracies, there is a growing body of research that recognizes the educational value of youth culture and its ability to help adolescents develop literacy proficiency (Alvermann, & Hagood, 2000; Dyson, 2002; Marsh, 2006; McVee et al., 2008; Stevens, 2001; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007). In recent studies, such literacies have been found to help bridge home and school interests (Dyson, 2002), encourage critical literacy (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), and even help students become more proficient in academic literacies (Alvermann et al., 1999). Despite these positive findings, there is still great resistance among teachers to using such materials for instructional purposes (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Mendez, 2004). Many teachers either have a negative view of youth culture (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Giroux & Simon, 1989), or do not know how to integrate it properly in their curriculum (Stevens, 2001).

Youth culture is "the sum of the ways of living of adolescents...the body of norms, values, and practices recognized and shared by members of the adolescent society as appropriate guides to actions" (Rice, 1996, p. 405). Because youth culture is such an

expansive, dynamic, and relatively-new phenomenon, there is still much debate over its larger function and social purpose (Steinberg, 2008). Janssen, Dechesne, & Knippenberg (1999) categorize these different positions into two major theoretical strands, one that regards youth culture aesthetically and the other empirically. In the aesthetic approach, youth culture is regarded as a “commercialized leisure activity...a fashion hype of clothes and music without psychological or existential meaning” (Janssen et al., 1999, p. 154). This position, shared by many adults and supported by prominent scholars like Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch, blames the ‘loss’ of American ideals on youth culture or a life of “nonstop, commercially prepackaged masturbational fantasy” (Bloom, 1987, p. 75). In contrast to this moralistic view, an empirical approach, driven by the field of sociology, argues that youth culture is essential for “socialization and psychological well-being” (Janssen et al., 1999, p. 154). For example, in his study of metalheads, Arnett (1996) theorized that alternative youth cultures, like heavy-metal, help young people prepare for responsibilities of adulthood. Similarly, in their experiments testing Terror Management Theory (TMT), Janseen et al. (1999) discovered that participating in youth culture “provides [young] people with a meaningful place in a meaningful world” (p. 155).

In this study, youth culture is defined as “the popular culture thought to appeal to and shape the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents and youth” (Steinberg, 2002, para. 1). Applying a critical lens to this neutral definition, youth culture is recast as “not an imposed mass culture or a people’s culture, it is more than a terrain of exchange between the two” (Morrell, 2002, p. 73). In this way, youth culture is not removed from the sphere of adults, but instead becomes a site of ideological struggle, a negotiation between dominant groups (grownups) and non-dominant groups (youth). In other words, it is a

space where young people consolidate to form communities and use those associations to support them as they forge their identity and eventually enter the adult-world.

Despite its complexity, many educators continue to view youth culture as nothing but a pastime that corrupts “morals by favorably disposing [young people] towards violence, individualism, hedonism, and materialism” (Kenway & Bullen, 2001, p. 2). In other words, it is a “one-way act of mind control” that deviates from academic goals (Gainer, 2007, p. 108; see also Duncan-Andrade, 2004). According to Giroux & Simon (1989), this fear is fueled by the belief that youth culture can “potentially [be] disruptive of existing circuits of power” (p. 224). Rejecting these mindless and hostile understandings, Alvermann & Xu (2003) regard youth culture as ‘everyday culture,’ where teens consume, produce, negotiate, enjoy, and resist different kinds of media on a daily basis. In this way, “children are agents in the construction of their own culture at the same time as being subject to hegemonic discourses of profit and consumerism....they both accept and reject the products offered to them” (Millard & Marsh, 2001, p. 21; see also Gainer, 2007). Given this understanding of youth culture, Alvermann & Xu (2003) argue that such materials must not only be included in the classroom, but done so in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Texts embedded in youth culture—referred to in this paper as youth literacies—generally present an excellent opportunity for teachers to enrich their curriculum by exploring voices that are typically marginalized or ignored in the classroom yet are highly relevant to adolescents. Because youth culture is frequently (though not exclusively) countercultural (Ross, 1989) it can be used to deepen understanding of a given subject or topic. For example, when studying the Civil Rights movement, teachers

can include rock-and-roll and explore the historical significance of its fusion of “race music” with white performers (Bogdanov, Woodstra, & Erlewine, 2002, p. 1303). Analyzing the music of Elvis, specifically his early covers of popular African-American songs that were played on ‘white’ radio stations (while the original songs were not) (Deffaa, 1996), can offer keen insight into the changing racial dynamics of modern America. Teachers can also draw on current youth literacies like hip hop to explore the legacy and impact of the Civil Rights movement on contemporary minorities. This type of instruction not only anchors learning within youth-cultural texts, but validates these sources as they complicate the “standard narrative” and provide more nuanced learning (Giroux & Simon, 1989).

Including youth literacies in the classroom also gives students the opportunity to share their expertise and thereby take more ownership in learning. Such lessons can even work to validate and transform students’ understandings of their personal literacy practices. For example, many popular contemporary youth literacies like videogames are multimodal and are embedded with different modes that communicate and contribute to the overall understanding of the text (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). If students are fans of MMOGs, teachers can use their videogame expertise advantageously by using the game as a text to discuss narrative elements like characterization, plot, and setting, to compare how different mediums communicate meaning, or teach constructive collaboration skills when students work in groups. In this way, incorporating youth literacies is not only potentially more inclusive, but can give students opportunities to expand their own knowledge base within the classroom context.

According to some theorists, teachers who include youth culture in the classroom “walk a dangerous road [because such efforts, though noble, can often lead to] a form of voyeurism or satisfy an ego-expansionism constituted on the pleasures of understanding those who appear as Other to us” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 25). To avoid these potential pedagogical pitfalls, educators should conceptualize these instances of inclusion as “the terrain on which we must meet our students in a critical and empowering pedagogical encounter” (p. 25). In this way, youth literacies should not be used by teachers to consolidate a “unifying ideology... [but as] the basis for developing a critical pedagogy through and for the voices of those who are often silenced” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 220). Using youth literacies in this way promotes the understanding that “multiple forms of power and experience structure and position different groups in sets of relations that must always be questioned as part of a larger project of extending and improving human capabilities” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 220).

The Graphic Narrative: Its History, Format, & Audience

While some youth literacies may be difficult to include in the classroom, the graphic novel, a narrative work in which story is conveyed through sequential art and text (Oxford English Dictionary, 1993), can be fluidly integrated because of its book-like appearance and literary content. Such texts can be used to broaden the curriculum and expose students to new perspectives while also encouraging them to consider new channels of communication and develop multimodal literacy skills. Additionally, graphic narratives also have the potential to increase achievement through engagement which can ultimately lead to better academic performance (Carter, 2007; Krashen, 2005; Schwarz, 2006).

The History of the Graphic Narrative

The graphic narrative is situated within a long tradition of illustrated text, rooted in pre-Columbian picture manuscripts, hieroglyphics, and even prehistoric cave paintings (Chute, 2008; McCloud, 1993). The modern comic structure, with its complex system of panels and gutters, was largely invented in the mid-nineteenth century by Swiss schoolmaster Rodolphe Töpffer (Chute, 2008; Kunzle, 2007). Drawing inspiration from both early picture-stories and the emerging novel, Töpffer created a new medium of text which he called “picture-novels” (Kunzle, 2007). Even in this infantile stage, picture-novels were extolled for their mass-cultural appeal and their conceptualization “as an anti-elitist art form” (Chute, 2008, p. 455). In the United States, this consumer potential was quickly recognized by media magnate, Joseph Pulitzer. Publishing Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid* cartoons in his *New York World* ultimately helped Pulitzer expand his circulation base and grow his media empire (Gordon, 1998). These early comics were widely embraced because they were “a welcome relief in homes that otherwise had only novels as printed entertainment” (Weiner, 2003, p. 1). In this way, the first American comics, unlike European comics, were largely employed as a vehicle of early 20th century consumer culture. Not unlike the first novels, these early comics were designed to keep newspapers selling and typically featured reoccurring characters and thrilling storylines (Gordon, 1998).

Though the comic book form was first published in the 1920s, these early works were mostly expanded versions of newspaper cartoon strips and provided publishers with a fresh medium to market their already popular genre stories (Weiner, 2003). A seismic shift in the world of comics occurred with the arrival of Superman in 1938. This iconic

character not only heralded a new genre of heroic storytelling, but set the standard, tone, and even aesthetic for decades of American comics (Weiner, 2003). First published on the eve of World War II, Superman became symbolic of the war efforts and helped popularize the selling of war bonds (Daniels, 1995). According to cartoonist Jules Feiffer (2003), Superman's mass appeal is rooted in his alter-ego of Clark Kent which anchors the character within a relatable identity. In the 1930s, a time of great economic depression, Superman offered a powerful venue for both fantasy and wish fulfillment. Other scholars attribute Superman's early popularity to his immigrant backstory which challenged the boundaries of social acceptance (Regalado, 2005) and spoke to the many newly-minted Americans of the 1930s and 40s (Pevey, 2007). With such broad appeal, Superman became the driving force behind the popularization of the American comic book. By the end of the 1940s, he was joined by a pantheon of superheroes, including Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America, characters that collectively defined and shaped American comics (Weiner, 2003).

Booming with post-war optimism, America entered the 1950s with a newly identified social subgroup: the teenager.

When this term was coined in 1945, segments of the entertainment industry, such as popular music, began to be produced for consumption by this newly defined group, those in the period between childhood and adulthood. They were the first generation to have grown up with comic books, and they liked them. As a result, comic books appeared everywhere teens hung out. (Weiner, 2003, p. 3)

However, due to its popularity among teenagers, comics were deemed the "lowest rung on the cultural ladder" (Weiner, 2003, p. 3). With the war receding from popular memory, comics of the 1950s largely took up other genres like romance and humor. The exception

to this trend was publisher EC or Educational Comics. In a dramatic shift, EC stopped producing illustrated Bible stories, and instead began publishing a new satirical kind of comic (Weiner, 2003). These self-deprecating and ironic comics, most notably exemplified in *MAD Magazine*, captured the James Dean-like subversive attitude of the 1950s and were extremely popular among teenagers (Weiner, 2003). EC's comics became so popular that they even drew the attention of the McCarthy Congress.

Fueled by the 1954 publication of psychiatrist Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, grownups grew increasingly concerned about how comics influenced young people. Wertham's book claimed that comics gave readers "a distorted view of reality" and caused rebelliousness, delinquency, illiteracy, and even suicide. So powerful was the hysteria driven by this book that its legacy has overshadowed the comics industry ever since. Fearful of being shut down by Congress or worse, publishers of comics committed to self-regulate their material and formed the Comics Code of Authority. The code, enacted by the Comics Magazine Association of America, censored texts for violent language, nudity, and most importantly, ensured that government officials always "triumphed over evil...[and] were not depicted in a way to create disrespect for established authority" (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 1955). Though this move allowed most publishers to retain some control over their material, comics, with the exception of MAD (which converted to a new format to avoid the CCA) "lost their social relevance" (Weiner, 2003, p. 8). With these new regulations, comics no longer spoke to teenage experience in the same open and frank way, and as a result, were no longer as popular among young people. Contributing to this loss was the growing prevalence of other media, such as television and the film industry, which recognized and competed for

the attention of American teenagers. Comics scholar Bradford W. Wright (2003) asserts that “teenagers had arrived as a major market just as the comic book industry had effectively forsook its adolescent audience. By stripping away the freedom of writers and artists to depict the varieties of their readers’ fantasies and concerns, the code confined comic books to a supervised, puerile level and enforced the very kind of conformity that millions of young people were beginning to reject” (p. 181).

With Cold War hysteria rising, the 1960s saw a return of superhero-themed comics. Depicting the Soviets as the enemy rather than the cops, these new works satisfied the restrictions set by the CAA while also keeping comics relevant and profitable in an age of new media and social unrest (Wright, 2003). These new characters, like Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, and the Hulk, were also markedly different from their Superman forbearer because they were “reluctant superheroes who struggled with the confusion and ambivalent consequences of their own power” (Wright, 2003, p. 180). In addition to securing new readers, adult comic book readers took their fandom to new heights by establishing comic conventions and fanzines. These fans recognized that “Dr. Wertham had been wrong; [devotees] weren’t delinquents or crazy, in fact, several of them had gone on to achieve success in real life, but they still liked comic books” (Weiner, 2003, p. 11).

In opposition to the continued self-censorship of comics and their refusal to be too countercultural, the 1970s heralded a flourishing underground ‘comix’ movement. Inspired by *MAD*, comix were popularized outside of the commercial mainstream and were distributed independently through local “head” shops. These comix were typically too avant-garde or overtly rejected the CCA to be considered for publication and

distribution by the big publishing houses. According to Chute (2008), however, the comix movement served as a potent source of inspiration for many contemporary graphic novelists:

Underground comics, a reaction to the censorious content code that debilitated the mainstream industry, were an influential cultural vehicle, challenging and arresting because they mediated on the violation of taboos...Out of this culture, today's most enduring graphic narratives take shape—serious, imaginative works that explored social and political realities by stretching the boundaries of a historically mass medium. (p. 456)

With this new localized underground comix scene, the 1970s also saw the establishment of the comic book store. Comics had traditionally been sold in grocery, drug, or toy stores, but comic book stores radically transformed the world of comics, creating a more narrowly-targeted distribution system (Wright, 2003). The comic book store not only gave independent artists the opportunity to distribute their work, but also helped the big publishers deliver a higher quality product to their fans. The store, with its customized comic-book sized shelving, ensured that the material was sold in good condition. It also gave publishers the opportunity to experiment with more mature content because stores catered to a select clientele while drug stores, where comics had been typically sold, did not. The comic book store also enabled publishers to more easily monitor and respond to the public's changing tastes and interests. Most importantly, it helped establish a comics community because “to the comic book fan, the comic book store was a kind of heaven: a room full of comic books, populated by other people who liked them without any judgments” (Weiner, 2003, p. 14).

Although the comics industry continued to operate in both a dwindling commercial market and a growing underground movement, these two trends saw a

convergence in the 1978 publication of the first graphic novel by Will Eisner. The term graphic novel, believed to have been created in hopes of attracting a publisher (Weiner, 2003), highlighted the text's novel-like qualities, its longer length, and realistic content. Eisner's graphic novel, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, defies the conventional comic book in a number of key ways. First, its storyline is serious, dark, and most importantly, realistic in its depiction of working class life in a Depression-era New York City tenement. Second, its structure is unique because it replaces the traditional protagonist-driven narrative with four thematically linked stories, each of which contains a unique plot and perspective. Third, its oversized, stark illustrations convey most of the narrative elements and supplant the typical function of text. Though it took him some time to find a publisher, Eisner became one of the world's most prolific graphic novelists, shaped the medium in new and exciting ways.

While comic books were still popular and in wide circulation, Eisner's graphic novel presented a new format for comic creators, and the mid-1980s saw a brief flowering of such works (McGrath, 2004). After Eisner, the graphic novel was further defined as a format by Art Spiegelman, particularly in his Pulitzer-prize winning text, *Maus*. Initially published serially in the underground *RAW* magazine, *Maus* is a complex multi-generational family narrative in which Spiegelman intertwines his father's memories of World War II with his own struggle as a young artist. Told in a spectrum of grays, Spiegelman's work is perhaps most well-known for its Orwellian inspired metaphor in which he uses different animals to categorize ethnic groups. In conjoining many different literary constructions and traditions, *Maus* defies categorization; Weiner (2003) calls it "a remarkable work, awesome in its conception and execution...at one and

the same time a novel, a documentary, a memoir, and a comic book” (p. 35). Though publishers did not expect it to sell well, *Maus* was a hit and became the first graphic novel to really appeal to a non-comics audience (Weiner, 2003). As the first graphic novel to win a major literary prize, *Maus* demonstrated that, for the first time, “the non-comic book reading audience did appreciate sophisticated, rich, visionary storytelling” (Weiner, 2003, p. 38).

Though it has taken several decades for the graphic novel to fully establish itself as a literary format, it has become an increasingly popular and incredibly rich source of new material (McGrath, 2004). Graphic novels continue to defy genre and expand their reading base, developing higher quality characters, plotlines, and illustrations while also expanding into nontraditional comic genres like history, non-fiction, journalism, and autobiography (Eisner, 2008). As the format continues to develop, graphic novels are slowly being recognized for their literary contributions and collecting accolades and awards from even the most ‘high-culture’ of institutions (McGrath, 2004). These acclaims continue to influence new generations of comic creators whose works continue to be more innovative and more inventive. In some cases, graphic novelists, like the avant-garde Chris Ware, are not only moving the format in new directions, but are thoroughly destabilizing its conventions and, as a result, an entirely new form of graphica seems to be on the crux of emerging.

The Comics Format

All graphic narratives make use of the comics format which employs both text and image as storytelling partners, conveying the narrative via a distinctive layout

comprised of panels and gutters (the space between the panels). As Chute (2008)

describes:

Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counterpoint of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty space). Highly textured in its narrative scaffolding, comics doesn't blend the visual and the verbal – or use one to simply illustrate the other—but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously; a reader of comics not only fills in the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning. (p. 452)

From the reader's standpoint, comics are a “radically fragmented and unstable [medium]” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 36). This is because comics, unlike other texts, are constructed in very different ways and draw on two different semiotic systems to establish a particular reading experience. These different elements work in tandem to “compose several kinds of *tension*, in which various ways of reading—various interpretive options and potentialities—must be played against each other” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 36). Readers must negotiate between the words and the images, between the panel and page layout in order to comprehend the narrative successfully.

The structure of the comics page, with its inner architecture of configured panels, can make it difficult to read the text in the correct sequence. Additionally, the story is piecemealed within the panels which requires the reader to connect the individual cells in order to make sense of the overall narrative. This is similar to looking at a series of photographs depicting a sequence of events. Although each photograph (panel) captures a moment in time, in order to access the larger story that connects the different snapshots together, the viewer must close the gaps between them by creating narrative links. Referred to by interpreters of graphic novels as ‘practicing closure,’ this requires the

reader to consolidate the information depicted within the panels and the subliminal or implied action conveyed by the gutters, the space between the panels (Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 1996). By incorporating what is seen within the panels with what is unseen in the gutters, the reader effectively ‘closes’ the narrative distance between the ‘breakdowns’ or panels and creates a sense of cohesion within the text (Pratt, 2012; McCloud, 2006; Hatfield, 2005).

Even when readers have practiced closure effectively, they may still struggle to understand the text. This is because graphic novels are typically multilayered and convey narrative in several different ways. The story told within the panels, referred to as diegesis, is the depiction of the comic-world; essentially, the ‘reality’ of the characters and the lives they inhabit (Bavinka, 2011). Although diegesis is the world of the story, it is shaped by the structures outside of it (Bavinka, 2011; Hatfield, 2005). In comics, this is referred to as extradiegetic space; structures like the page layout and aesthetics that frame the story and give it a meta-narrative layer (Bavinka, 2011; Hatfield, 2005; Schwartz, 2006). For example, a panel may depict a character doing a particular action; however, the way that panel is shaped or where it is located on the page may lend insight or situate the action in a way that is not conveyed within the panel itself (Bavinka, 2011; Hatfield, 2005; Schwartz, 2006). For example in *Maus*, a character is enclosed within an unusual panel that is shaped like a Jewish star. This unusual framing, an extradiegetic structure, impacts the reader’s understanding of the story. In this way, diegetic and extradiegetic spaces work together to construct a multilayered narrative. Unlike other forms of comics, graphic novels “maintain a tug-a-war [between these two spaces]” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 48,

see also McCloud, 2006; Sousanis, 2011) which makes the ability to navigate them an important skill.

For these reasons, comics may necessitate not only the adaptation of traditional reading strategies, but even entirely new techniques through which to help the reader navigate these particular inner tensions, attain textual meta-awareness, and ultimately achieve full comprehension (Hatfield, 2005; Risko, et al., 2011). While many educators argue that comics are a choice text for struggling readers because of their visual features (Crawford, 2004; McTaggart, 2005) this argument oversimplifies the reading complexities of this format. While comics may be one way to assist such readers in “the acquisition of print literacy, they are by no means interchangeable with conventional reading [and in fact can be] of only particular and limited use as reading aids because of their complexity” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 36). In this way, advocates for the inclusion of comics on the basis of their “easiness,” ignore the unique textual challenges of this format (Hatfield, 2005) and may be ill-prepared to help novice readers. Additionally, it is important to recognize that not all comics are the same. Some scholars argue that certain graphic texts, particularly newer nonfiction graphic narratives, challenge deeply rooted conceptions of text in such unprecedented ways that the field has yet to thoroughly grasp their full potential (Chute, 2008). For this reason, teachers who choose to include graphic narratives in the classroom must be careful not to assume that students, by virtue of their age and multimodal literacy habits, are innately capable of navigating this type of text successfully. Instead, teachers should be prepared to guide their students in accessing the unique textual features of the graphic narrative by developing unique reading strategies

and instructional activities that address the particular demands of this format (Hatfield, 2005, Risko, et al., 2011).

Additionally, though many educators advocate using graphic narratives solely as a gateway text with which to lure reluctant readers to more traditional forms of literature (Crawford, 2004; Krashen, 2005; McTaggart, 2005), such an approach may not access the full learning potential of this kind of text. Instead, teachers should consider exploring the graphic narrative as its own unique literary format and highlight its ability to cross genre lines in exciting and unprecedented ways. For example, *Maus* is a nonfictional memoir told via fictional narrative constructions; it is undoubtedly a piece of Holocaust literature, but its cartoonish treatment of the material makes it difficult to categorize. (Spiegelman publicly and successfully fought the *New York Times* to get his book moved from the fiction to the nonfiction bestseller list, see Franklin, 2011). In this way, graphic narratives can defy conventional literary genres and in doing so bring a fresh perspective to the ELA classroom.

In addition to discovering a new kind of literary text, educators should use graphic narratives to discuss issues that speak to adolescent experiences, concerns, and interests. Many excellent graphic narratives, perhaps in the tradition of comics, explicitly address topics (e.g. homelessness, sex, war, poverty, and torture) that appeal to many young people, but that teachers may find difficult to discuss in their classrooms. For example, Katherine Arnoldi's *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (1998), is a triumphant autobiography that addresses rape, homelessness, and single motherhood. Similarly, Gipi's *Notes for a War Story* (2007) recounts the Balkan War through the eyes of three teenagers, only one of whom escapes a violent criminal life. According to

Schwarz (2002), another important “benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways, giving voice to minorities and those with diverse viewpoints” (p. 9). For example, *Zahra’s Paradise* (2011) explores the political turmoil following Iran’s Green Revolution from the perspective of university students and bereaved mothers. Similarly, Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (2007) explores the struggle to grow up on an Indian reservation and receive a solid education without forsaking cultural heritage. These texts illustrate that graphic novels can be used for a variety of instructional purposes that may engage students in new ways. As more educators continue to identify comics as a format rather than as a genre, there is a growing acknowledgment of both the complexity of this medium and the broad literary range it encompasses. By redressing these misconceptions of comics, teachers can begin to see such texts not as an entry to the canon, but as independently valuable, worthy of class time and school resources.

The Comics Audience

Adolescents have always been fans of comics because they are designed for young people often “by creators little older [than their readers]” (Wright, 2003, p. xvi). In 1943, during what was arguably the golden age of comics, Fleda Cooper Kinneman, a high school ELA teacher, conducted a study to determine why nearly all of her incoming freshmen read comics. Her students reported that comics offered them “(1) the thrill of danger and adventure, (2) story value, (3) humor, and (4) wish fulfillment” (p. 332). In this way, comics, much like rock and roll, have long appealed to North American youth culture, catering and contributing to its unique styles, behaviors, and interests (Wright, 2003). Additionally, comic books are quickly and cheaply produced making them a

particularly adept medium for capturing and responding to the changing tastes of American teens (Wright, 2003).

Comics became fully identified as a teen medium when adults attempted to prohibit and censor them in the 1950s. In response, comics went largely underground and continued “to develop and thrive outside of the critical, aesthetic, and commercial criteria expected of more ‘mature’ media” (Wright, 2003, p. xiv). For this reason, comics evolved into not only a satirical medium, but also one that became preoccupied with capturing the unique experiences of young people. Thus, “to critically examine comics is to better understand the changing world of young people as well as the historical forces intersecting to shape it” (Wright, 2003, p. xiii).

Though graphic novels take longer to produce than the traditional comic book, they have surpassed them in popularity and are currently undergoing a renaissance (McGrath, 2004). Despite a general decline in literary reading, the graphic novel “is one of the most popular and fastest-growing types of young adult literature” (Bucher & Manning, 2006, p. 285). Some even argue that these texts are the future of reading, indicative of a more profound literacy shift, an epistemological turn from a print-based model to a multimodal understanding of literacy (McGrath, 2004). As the *London Daily Telegraph* observed:

There seems to be no limit to the [comics] medium’s ambitions...Those accustomed to scanning regular columns of type often have difficulty assimilating the haphazard captions in comics at the same time as jumping from image to image. But to a young generation brought up with television, computers, and video games, processing verbal and visual information on several levels at once seems natural, even preferable. (Eisner, 2008, p. xvi)

Graphic narratives are not only challenging notions of text, but are also becoming increasingly popular among young and adult readers (McGrath, 2004). In many ways, these texts may represent the future of reading, making it important for educators to study and include them in their classrooms.

The Educational Benefits of Graphic Narratives

Despite their growing popularity and numerous educational uses, incorporating graphic narratives in the classroom is a relatively new and untested phenomenon. While such texts have been lauded by librarians for the past decade or so (see, for example Bruggeman, 1997; DeCandido, 1990; Kan, 1994), very few teachers use them in the classroom and to date, only one state has included graphic novels as part of their mandated curriculum (Maryland State Department of Education, 2011). Perhaps it is for this reason that most studies using these texts have been done either outside the classroom or in small, specialized groups. Though small, this body of research illustrates some of the educational benefits of the graphic novel, including its ability to support comprehension, develop critical literacy, grow vocabulary, encourage writing, and motivate reading.

Supporting Comprehension

The pictorial elements of the graphic narrative may support comprehension as recent research suggests that visual modalities can support print-based literacy which in turn supports reading comprehension (Fisher & Frey, 2008). For struggling readers, visual demonstrations of story elements (like character and plot) may be particularly helpful because oftentimes such readers “complain that they can’t see or visualize text [while reading]” (Beers, 2003, p. 285). This ability, to “see” the story internally as it is

“happening” on the page, is a critical component of reading comprehension (Beers, 2003). Recent studies in brain research have found that as many as 8% of students, both boys and girls, cannot visualize during reading (Lyga, 2007). Graphic narratives may help readers visualize the text through its inclusion of pictures and its use of visual grammar to denote time, space, motion, emotion, and sound. In a related study, Smetana and colleagues (2009) used graphic novels as part of a high school English summer school class for deaf students struggling with literacy. Because deaf students communicate visually, graphic novels, which convey some meaning through pictures, naturally appealed to these students and helped them strengthen their literacy skills. Studying the graphic novel also helped students develop critical reading and connect personally with the text. The authors argued that “secondary English teachers in both middle and high school need to take a closer look at the advantages provided by a unit on comic books and graphic novels for all of their students [because these texts] appeal to today’s visual learner [and can] provide unique and interesting combinations of text and graphics that engage large numbers of students” (p. 239). This study indicates that when trained to read these visual elements properly, the pictorial features of graphic narrative may be able to help different kinds of readers understand the text more successfully.

In addition to supporting struggling readers with comprehension, graphic narratives have also been found to help students develop literary thinking (Risko, et al., 2011). With their innovative use of illustration, these texts can broaden readers' understanding of sequence, irony, flashback, and other literary elements (Risko, et al., 2011). For example, Seglem and Witte (2009) observed an eighth-grade class that created cartoons strips to improve their understanding of the poetry of Langston Hughes, Walt

Whitman, and T.S. Eliot. By visually displaying the texts through their “poetry comics,” students reported improved understanding of literary constructions and poetic themes.

While these visual features can be helpful to struggling, reluctant, and proficient readers alike, it is important that teachers not presume that illustration makes graphic narratives easier to read. Any proficient comics reader can tell you, pictures do not always directly support the printed text, and at times dual storylines, one visual and one textual can work in opposition to create a multidimensional narrative. For example, in Jeff Kinney’s immensely popular *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2007) series, two storylines are developed; “one completely within the illustrations and the other within the words” (Risko, et al., 2011, p. 377). Reading such materials, while challenging, develops modal dexterity and deepens understanding of how various modes interact and compete with one another. In this way, the pictorial elements of graphic narratives may help the reader understand the text better or can make the material difficult to navigate and ultimately impede comprehension (Risko, et al., 2011).

Developing Critical Literacy

By combining words and pictures, comics force the reader to “‘see’ themselves as analytical critics working to assemble and uncover the deeper meaning of the work” (Versaci, 2001, p. 64). In other words, graphic novels can be used to develop critical literacy which is the ability to deconstruct messages of power and identify implicit ideologies within a text, the medium in which it is conveyed, and its intended audience (Browett, 2007). Unlike comics of old, contemporary graphic novels encompass a variety of themes, many representing the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups (Schwarz, 2007). The decision to include graphic narratives in the classroom, particularly

those that explore marginalized voices, ultimately diversifies and balances representation in the curriculum which Carter (2007) argues:

The more graphic novels become integrated into the matrix of the English classroom, the more transformed English will become, moving away from notions of literacy that are only letter-based, from “one size fits all” literacy instruction, and from classroom libraries and reading lists devoid of panels and borders. In short, the English classroom that integrates graphic novels will be and is becoming a classroom with books that suggest the class is a place of acceptance, diversity, deep and multifaceted reading, and discussion that does not shy away from challenge. (p. 52)

There are several studies that describe the use of graphic novels to explore complex political and social issues. Boatright (2010) describes using three contemporary graphic novels—*The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), *The Four Immigrants Manga: A Japanese Experience in San Francisco, 1904-1924* (Kiyama, 1999), and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) — to represent various immigration experiences in America. In exploring these different narratives, Boatright assisted his students in “developing an analytical awareness of graphic novels’ power to represent immigrant experiences and how these representations privilege certain immigrant experiences while leaving countless other immigrant experiences untold” (2010, p. 475). In another study, Chun (2009) used *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) to build critical literacy and draw on ELL students’ multiliteracies practices. He observed “how [the students] read the [text] *visually*...so that [they] would be able to follow the sequential but nonlinear paneling of the story” (p. 151). Chun asserts that the “students’ enthusiasm for [the] graphic novel [was] enormous” (p. 51) and helped them learn “how language works both for and against people” (p. 152). This awareness enabled his students to not only connect the stories to their own immigration experiences, but also develop critical literacy skills while doing so.

Growing Vocabulary

There is also research that suggests that graphic narratives can be helpful in the development of vocabulary, particularly in regard to ELLs (Calo, 2010). When confronted with an unfamiliar word, graphic texts can support readers by allowing them to access its meaning through other modes. This can not only help the reader understand an unknown word and its context while reading the text, but also help him or her remember it better afterwards as recent research suggests that vocabulary is best acquired when it is presented through multiple modes (Bromley, 2002). In this way, graphic novels have been found to be good instructional tools for vocabulary enrichment for ELLs (Calo, 2010), and presumably non-ELL students as well.

Encouraging Writing

Several studies have looked at how graphic narratives can improve writing within a school context. Writing is an essential literacy skill; it is the primary method of communication, therefore “students’ academic achievement often depends on their ability to write [well]” (Mason, Bendek-Wood, & Valasa, 2010, p. 303). In one study, Frey & Fisher (2007) used graphic novels to improve writing proficiency in a remedial class in an urban, low-socioeconomic school. To scaffold instruction, Frey & Fisher first introduced students to pantomime graphics (graphics without dialogue) and had them write accompanying dialogue. As students grew more proficient at writing captions, they began writing the endings of short graphic novels. As a final project, students created their own visual essays using a variety of media including anime, magazines, and original art. The researchers found that while working with graphica, students were more engaged

in the writing process, improved their writing mechanics, and exhibited much more innovation and creativity in their work.

In another study, Lawrence, et al. (2009) studied twelve students in a three-week campus based summer literacy program. Together, they read *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography* (Helfer & Duburke, 2006) and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (Satrapi, 2005). In addition to reading graphic novels, students used ComicLife software to write their own five or six panel comic strips. To support them in this process, they participated in regular writing conferences and were encouraged to incorporate literary devices such as irony, dialogue, flashback, and setting. The researchers found that using this kind of technology built on students' writing knowledge and expertise. They also found that all students enjoyed working with graphic novels, even those that were initially unfamiliar with the format. Though many students struggled at first with the basic technology requirements, "connecting reading, writing, visual, and technological literacy provided students with opportunities to write for wider audiences and produce authentic texts" (p. 492).

Motivating Reading

Unlike some other literary forms, comics have a passionate fan base and devoted readership. Motivation, though not officially recognized by the National Reading Panel, is undoubtedly an essential component of successful reading development (Alvermann, 2001; Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004; Pitcher, et al., 2007). This is because students "who read merely to complete an assignment, with no sense of involvement or curiosity...are not likely to become lifelong learners" (Guthrie, 1996, p. 433; see also Weinstein, 2006). This desire to read for pleasure, without assignment or reward, is what

Guthrie and his colleagues (2004) define as intrinsic motivation or “the disposition to read for its own sake and for the enjoyment of reading” (p. 56).

Recent studies have found that overall, young people are spending less and less time reading for pleasure (Cornog, 2012). Despite this steady decline, graphica is becoming increasingly popular, especially among young adults (Seglem & Witte, 2009). One New York City librarian noted that half of all their manga is checked out at any given time (Zabriskie, 2010). Similarly, in my own middle school classroom, the graphic novels were so popular that they were rarely on the shelves, and students used a waiting list system in order to have a chance to read them. Some educators, particularly school librarians, have argued that this growing popularity justifies the inclusion of such texts in school libraries and classroom literacy centers because it can “encourage students to take advantage of pleasure reading opportunities” (O’English, Matthews, & Lindsay, 2006, p. 175). Supporting this argument, Ujiie and Krashen (1996) found that “middle school boys who read comic books, read more in general than boys who did not read comics, read more books, and enjoyed reading more” (para. 5).

In a related study, Botzakis (2009) explored the motivation of comics book readers through the lens of adult fans. He was particularly interested as to why these lifelong readers voluntarily participated “in a specific literacy community for an extended period of time” (p. 51). In his multi-case study, Botzakis concluded that adults engage in comic book reading for a variety of purposes ranging from garnering personal meaning to companionship to a sense of ownership. Though some viewed reading comics as “a temporary shelter from worries, a companion when lonely, or a mirror that allowed them to view themselves and the world differently,” Botzakis found that readers developed

“expertise, connoisseurship, mental development, or enlightenment [through reading comics]” (p. 57). This study not only offers “evidence of meaningful uses of popular culture texts,” (Botzakis, p. 57), but also helps recast graphic narratives as academically valuable and worthy of class time.

Conclusion

Although some of the benefits of graphic novels have been well-documented, other aspects of this type of text have been largely ignored by the educational community. Though some scholars argue that the graphic narrative can be a challenging text to read, there is no current research that addresses how teachers and readers adapt to its unique textual affordances. For example, how students learn to navigate multiple modes of meaning or how teachers orient their instruction to access its distinctive narrative constructions. Much of the current research seems to portray the graphic narrative as a readily accessible text, one that requires no special training or skills to read. This research argues for inclusion on the basis that such materials can diversify the curriculum, engage resistant readers, support struggling readers, or be used as a kind of “gateway literacy” with which to introduce readers to more sophisticated and academic texts. Despite this widespread belief that “if you acquire graphic novels, young adults will come” (Mooney, 2002, p. 18), there are some voices cautioning teachers on the prospective challenges they may face when working with these materials. For example, Schwarz (2006) encourages teachers “to do their homework” (p. 63) and familiarize themselves with the history and format of graphic novels before introducing them to their students. Similarly, Risko et al., (2011) warn of “the potential difficulties students may have as they navigate through illustrations and text, especially if they are expecting that the illustrations are less

important than the words for story development” (p. 377). They also argue that graphic novels may be more challenging to read than traditional print-based texts because readers may struggle to “think beyond each image and make connections to the overall story” (p. 377). In this way, the graphic novel, though an appealing text, may not be as seamlessly integrated into the ELA classroom as one may presume. In fact, it may present some distinctive learning opportunities and challenges that teachers must be prepared to deal with.

Additionally, much of the research positions the graphic novel as a bridge between comics and literary texts (Crawford, 2004; Krashen, 2005; McTaggart, 2005). Though the graphic novel shares some similarities with both the classic comic book and traditional literature, it is a hybrid of many different kinds of text, and as a result has unique affordances that can require specialized skills to read. For example, the graphic novel conveys narrative through multiple modes—like words and images—and multiple layers—like the layout and the panel—all of which the reader must be aware of in order to understand the text successfully. None of the studies presented here touch upon these issues or acknowledge the technical difficulties both teachers and students may face when trying to work with these texts within the context of an ELA classroom. It seems to be generally assumed that all students, perhaps by virtue of their age, should have little trouble working with such texts. Similarly, it seems that the graphic novel inherently appeals to young people and requires few instructional adaptations. This study sought to address these claims by delving into this learning process and exploring how students adjust to the unique reading landscape of the graphic narrative; ultimately, begging the question of how teachers can use them successfully and how students can learn to read

them effectively. The subsequent chapter will discuss how this study was conducted by describing the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This research study explored how a class of twelfth-graders experienced reading four graphic narratives assigned as part of an English Language Arts elective course. To meet this objective, I observed every lesson in which the class studied the texts or participated in related activities. During this data collection period, I wrote extensive field notes, conducted interviews, photographed class projects, and collected student writing. I also had access to almost all of the students' related coursework including their midterm exams. These materials were used to document both how students responded to the unique affordances of graphic narratives and how classroom instruction impacted their understanding of these texts.

Prior to this study, I had never visited the school and did not know any of the students personally. I was introduced to the teacher, Sara, through her doctoral advisor at Rutgers who connected us because of our common interest in using graphic narratives in educational settings. Although I primarily acted as an observer in her classroom, in exchange for allowing me to conduct the study in her class, I agreed to help Sara improve the course by offering suggestions and ideas. I also occasionally assumed other roles in the classroom over the course of this study such as coach, guest speaker, and teacher.

To fully grasp students' experiences, an in-depth view into the learning process was required. For this reason, an embedded case study approach was best suited for this study. According to Creswell (2007), a case study "is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases" (p. 74). Because all of the students experienced the same instruction in the same class, within a bounded system, the

class as a whole served as the case and each participating student as an individual unit of analysis (Yin, 2009). Though the group produced a lot of data, the amount was manageable because there were only seventeen students in the class, several of whom were routinely absent or late, making the core participating group about thirteen students. I opted to treat the class as a whole unit, instead of focusing on the experiences of a single or several students, in hopes that doing so would provide an authentic, rich, and contextualized portrait of how students experience graphic narratives within an ELA classroom.

In accordance with a typical case study approach, the data were derived from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007) including observations, interviews, artifacts, and documents (Yin, 2009). Generally, data were collected on-site and included frequent observations of the class at-work, interviews with students and the instructor, discussions with the entire class, and analysis of student assignments (including reading responses, surveys, illustrations, photographs, and midterm exam papers). In this chapter, I will elaborate on these and other elements of the research design, including the research site, the participants, the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, the researcher's role, the study's limitations, and issues of trustworthiness.

Site Description

Research for this study was conducted at a four-year, public, co-educational high school located in northern New Jersey. The school, Morningside High School (MHS), is large with about 2,000 enrolled students and 122 classroom teachers. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, MHS is demographically comprised of 737 Hispanic, 514 African-American, 379 Caucasian, 79 Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 2

American-Indian/Alaskan native students. Of the student population, 538 students qualify for free lunch and 139 for reduced lunch. The school is nearly evenly divided with 871 males and 840 females.

Morningside High School is situated on a sprawling campus on a full square block with numerous adjacent sporting fields and outer buildings. The main structure can be difficult to navigate as you make your way through the many different additions and renovations; it is a labyrinth of corridors and staircases. The hallway that connects the English department to the rest of the building is bright with student-created graffiti art; even the ceiling tiles have been individually decorated with loud colorful drawings. The hallway that opens directly to the individual classrooms is filled with club announcements, class projects, and large interesting murals, although some of these appear to be dated or in disrepair. Overall, the school culture, as reflected in the physical space of the building, appears to be vibrant even if parts of the building seem somewhat tired, worn, and even old.

MHS was deemed an appropriate site for this study because of its instructional openness; specifically, its willingness to let a teacher use graphic novels as a tool to promote and build literacy. In my numerous attempts to find a suitable site for this study, I discovered that many schools in the region do not use graphic narratives in the classroom because they do not believe such materials are educationally valuable. These school administrators reported feeling too busy working to meet adequate yearly progress to include 'non-essential' texts like graphic novels. MHS, though not an especially high performing school in the state, is unique as it has a markedly different attitude in this regard. Two years ago, the administration agreed to include graphic novels within an

existing course titled Creative Writing: Genre Studies. Sara, the teacher who asked to redesign the course and integrate graphic novels into its curriculum, is a second-year instructor who has taught this revised course since its inception. In this way, MHS is unique not only for its inclusion of alternative texts in the mainstream curriculum, but also for encouraging Sara to make the course her own by channeling her interests into the school curriculum. Though the school allowed these revisions, it is important to note that this course was only offered to twelfth-graders as an elective after they have completed the all-important high school proficiency assessments.

This study focused exclusively on Sara's twelfth-grade class. Though open to any senior, this one-year course does require teacher recommendation. Advertised as an exploration into various genres, students read and write all sorts of texts including college applications, books, essays, guides, letters, memoirs, newspapers, magazines, reviews, resumes, scripts, short stories, poetry, and contemporary graphic novels. In her inaugural year as a teacher, Sara expanded the course to include graphic novels because she was inspired by a class she had taken as an undergraduate at Rutgers University. In an interview, she shared with me that as a result of her own experience with these texts, she was inspired to find a way to bring them back to Morningside (Sara is also an alumna of MHS). The first year this revised course was offered, the MHS English department enthusiastically promoted its focus on graphic novels, and Sara taught several sections of the course. This year, due to a technical oversight, it was not promoted at all and most of the students, assuming they would be spending the majority of their class time engaged in creative writing, were unprepared (and even resistant) to engage with graphic novels.

The graphic novels in this course were taught in two chunks, or mini-units, which consisted of two graphic narratives each. In the first mini-unit, which began in early fall, the class read *Understanding Comics* and *The 9/11 Report*. The first text, *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993), was used primarily to educate students on the comics medium. Though they only read about half of it in the first few lessons, they did eventually complete the text in the second mini-unit. After this, students read *The 9/11 Report* (Jacobson & Colón, 2006) in its entirety to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks. Originally, the class had been slated to read *In the Shadow of No Towers* (Spiegelman, 2004) as students last year had done, but Sara deemed this text to be “too complicated” for this year’s group who seemed less enthusiastic about graphic narratives than her previous students had been.

After they read *The 9/11 Report* aloud together in class, students wrote two response papers. The first of these papers required them to identify which comprehension strategies they had used while reading the text. It seemed that the class was generally familiar with a range of traditional comprehension strategies—like previewing the text, activating prior knowledge, and summarizing—from their previous ELA classes. Additionally, many of these strategies were periodically discussed in class, especially when students voiced their struggles to read the texts successfully. The second response paper asked students to consider the legacy of 9/11 and to focus on how reading *The 9/11 Report* had affected their understanding of this historic event. Students also wrote a two-part reaction paper as part of their midterm exam, which was basically a lengthier version of the themes and issues explored in the first two response papers. Overall, this first mini-unit occurred over a one-month period and took twelve lessons.

After a two-month break to study other types of text, the class returned to graphic narratives. During the second mini-unit, the class read two award-winning graphic novels: *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (Spiegelman, 1986) and *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (Satrapi, 2004). Students began the unit by reading the remaining chapters of *Understanding Comics* (McCloud, 1993). These chapters covered a variety of topics, including how comics depict time, “show vs. tell,” frame narrative, provide a point-of-view, and use both words and images to establish meaning. This material was read aloud together in class and independently as homework. Reading these texts was supported by some hands-on activities, such as photo journal essays (when exploring framing and perspective), class presentations (when exploring “show vs. tell”), and creative writing (when exploring how comics depict time).

Students were introduced to *Maus* by reading an article (Hirsch, 1992) which Sara had originally read during her college course on graphic narratives. This text explored the nature of memoir and Spiegelman's decision to use comics to convey his father's story. Following this, Sara presented a brief Prezi (similar to a PowerPoint presentation) that introduced students to Spiegelman's work and some of the historical events depicted in the book. Following the presentation, Sara and I created a large timeline on the board and asked students to pool together any knowledge they had on World War II. In addition to including whatever correct information students shared, Sara and I also contributed to the timeline. The class was then assigned to read *Maus* which, unlike the previous graphic narratives, was read primarily as homework. Each day, Sara provided students with a few short comprehension questions to help guide their reading that night. In addition to the questions, students also received one or two conversation starters to preview for the next

day's class discussion. These starters were designed to help students analyze the text's construction, identify key themes, and understand the historical context. On a typical day, the comprehension answers were first reviewed together after which the class would break into small groups and use the starters to generate conversations.

Though these questions and starters generally helped student comprehend the text, they were not always sufficient. For example, though the class responded to questions and discussed the visual metaphor of *Maus* (each ethnicity is portrayed as a different animal), some still did not seem to relate to the idea. For this reason, Sara and I created a worksheet with different samples of Nazi propaganda, particularly pieces that promoted Jewish stereotypes. On this sheet there were also several questions exploring the issue of stereotypes, specifically how they can be used to manipulate public opinion. Students then explored the differences between caricature and stereotype and reflected on how these concepts affect their own lives. Students then drew their own 'anti-stereotype,' a picture of themselves in which they created a counter-narrative to the negative stereotypes that they had been subjected to. For example, Davonte drew a portrait of herself as a docile cat and wrote, "Lots of people think that most African-Americans are uneducated, drop-out of high school, have kids at 16, constantly fighting, rude, loud, and disrespectful. As an individual I am none of those things and I prove those stereotypes wrong." In addition to this activity, students concluded their study of *Maus* by working in groups to create their own cartoon strip in which they depicted their experiences reading this text.

As with *Maus*, Sara introduced her students to *Persepolis* by assigning them to read for homework two articles which she had originally read in her college course

(Hajdu, 2009; Storace, 2005). Hajdu's piece explores how Satrapi makes "a complex, ancient culture of the Middle East [as] her country—at least her loving view of it as a land of noble traditions and human passions [that is often misrepresented] by fundamentalist extremism, appealing to Western eyes" (p. 296). Storace's review discusses how *Persepolis* employs words and image "like a pair of dancing partners" both of which work to "explore [Satrapi's] double cultural heritage" (para. 2). The next day, Sara reviewed the key concepts and themes from these articles in class after which she presented a brief Prezi which aimed to introduce students to the historical events depicted in the book. Students were then assigned to read the first half of *Persepolis* at home as homework. For the last half of the book, students were given time in class either to read silently or with a partner and to consult with one another or with Sara if they had any questions on what they had read. For *Persepolis*, students wrote a two-page paper in which they responded to three open-ended questions that addressed the text's treatment of childhood, its overall aesthetics, and the main character's sense of displacement within her own country. Overall, this second mini-unit consisted of about twenty-three class periods and occurred over a three-month period.

Participants

This study explored how students experienced reading graphic narratives within a general education classroom and how learning was shaped by instruction. To examine this effectively, the course served as the research context while the entire class (the students, teacher, and learning environment) served as the case (Yin, 2009). Each student within the class was a potential embedded unit of analysis (Yin, 2009), providing a window into the learning experience, enriching the view with his or her individual voice,

experience, and perspective. I chose this particular approach because an embedded case study model “can often add significant opportunities for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single case” (Yin, 2009, p. 52-52).

Other research strategies could have been employed, specifically a multi-case study model with individual students serving as cases. However, this model was inappropriate for this study because all of the participants were situated within the same class, within the same context, making it difficult to differentiate students as individual cases (Yin, 2003). Additionally, students often studied the graphic narratives in small groups, essentially co-constructing knowledge and learning to work together with the texts. In this way, learning was shared among many students, and at times, even Sara, making it exceedingly difficult to distinguish the boundaries of a single participant’s ‘experience.’ By looking at the learner within the classroom context, an embedded research model effectively captured participant’s individual learning experiences while acknowledging the impact of the class as a whole, enabling me to listen to a single “soprano, mezzo, or alto” while also hearing the entire chorus.

Because the purpose of this study is to “document diverse variations and identify common patterns” (Creswell, 2007, p. 127), it employed both voluntary and maximum variation sampling strategies (Creswell, 2007) to recruit the embedded cases as units of analysis. Before I arrived, all students were made aware that I would be present and what my purpose was. During my first visit, I introduced myself and the project. I made it clear that students could choose to participate in the overall study, but not participate in the focus group interviews, or choose not to participate at all with neither negative nor positive consequences attached to either decision. Happily, the entire class opted to

participate in the study, though only a few initially agreed to be interviewed. Once I started conducting fieldwork, I began employing a purposeful, maximum variation sampling strategy in order to recruit more students to participate in the interviews. These students were selected based on their participation in class, specifically how they interacted with the texts. I tried to identify students from across the learning spectrum, including those who seemed either to possess strong opinions (either by actively demonstrating enjoyment of the graphic novels or expressing negativity towards them) and those that seemed ambivalent to the texts. In this way, I sought a cross section of learners. Before trying to recruit a student, I often ran the name by Sara who provided me with some information on the student such as his or her communication skills, attitude toward learning, and general standing in the class. Afterwards, I would approach these selected students privately and ask them to participate in the interviews. This process was repeated the first two weeks of study until seven students agreed to be interviewed.

The five girls and two boys that agreed to be interviewed not only reflected the rich ethnic diversity of the class and MHS in general, but also had varying experiences with graphic narratives. Latisha, an African-American, possesses a flamboyant sense of style and dropped, for personal reasons, an AP English class to take Sara's course instead. Though she was a top ELA student as a junior, she struggled in her senior year and received average grades in the class. Aubrey, a Hispanic student, was an outspoken class leader and received top grades in the course. Keisha, an African-American soft-spoken, fastidious student, received average grades in the course. Though they generally liked to read and write, Latisha, Aubrey, and Keisha had never read any graphic narratives prior to Sara's class.

In contrast, two other interviewees—Ashanti and Maria—are both avid manga (Japanese or Japanese-style comics) readers. Ashanti, an African-American, is a serious writer and received top grades in the course. Her best friend, Maria, a Caucasian, enjoys reading the manga series *Black Butler* and also received above average grades in the class. The two boys in the group—Jamal and Michael—were neither fans nor novices of graphic narratives; each reported having read some comics books such as *Archie* and *The Amazing Spider-man*. Jamal, a soft-spoken African-American, was quite shy and spoke very little in class. Michael, a Caucasian, was also frequently quiet in class and sat in the back corner of the room. Both boys received below average grades in the course.

These students, although they were interviewed, are not the only students featured in this study. As stated earlier, the class was viewed holistically as a group with every participating student along with Sara, working as an active partner in the meaning-making process. In general, the class was comprised of eight African-American students, six Caucasian students and three Hispanic students. Of these students fourteen were female—one who was deaf and accompanied by an interpreter—and three were male. I had numerous opportunities to speak to all of the students, especially when they worked independently or in small groups during class. I also had two opportunities to formally interview the class as a whole, once in the middle of the study and once at the end of it. These sessions gave me a chance to present my emerging findings to the students and get their feedback. In addition to these different opportunities to speak with students, most also provided me with access to their class work and journal writing.

Students were also invited to participate in this study as co-researchers because in order to fully understand how they responded to the graphic narratives, it was essential

that they be actively included as inquirers and knowers of their own learning experiences. To do this effectively, I not only discussed my research questions with them, but also frequently updated them on the direction of my work. I also asked that they consider themselves ‘researchers’ and take note of their own learning process. Whenever I shared my observations with students—whether it was with the entire class or with individual students—they would typically inform me of their “self-reports,” or things they were discovering about themselves as readers as they engaged with the graphic novels. On my last day in Sara's class, the entire class participated in a debriefing in which I reported to students what I believed were the major findings of the study. Then, I gave students the opportunity to present their own opinions on my work, give feedback on the study, and address other aspects that I had not sufficiently addressed.

Data Collection Procedures

According to Yin (2009) there are six forms of data collection in a case study approach: direct observation, participant observation, documents, archival records, interviews, and physical artifacts. This study, to various degrees, gathered all these elements. In this section, I will elaborate on the data collection procedures, specifically the types of observations and interviews which were conducted along with the documents and artifacts that were collected for this study.

Observations

Direct observation is when the researcher documents what is happening in the study site in real time, observing both the events and the context of the case (Yin, 2009). In contrast, participant observation is “a special mode of observation in which [the researcher] assume[s] a variety of roles within the case study situation and may actually

participate in the events being studied” (Yin, 2009, p. 111). In this study, both of these observation strategies were employed. For the majority of this study, I adopted a direct observational stance, remaining a passive observer who recorded in a field journal learning events, activities, discussions, and student reactions as they occurred. Overall, the focus of my observations was to capture both how students experienced the unique textual affordances of the graphic novel and how traditional ELA instruction impacted learning

Though I spent the majority of my time directly observing the class, several times I adopted a more participatory stance, specifically when I was invited to do so by Sara. On these occasions, I assumed a number of different roles. For example, I acted as a guest speaker when I provided background knowledge on Jewish culture while reading *Maus*. I acted as coach when I assisted Sara in designing a photo journal essay project with which the class would analyze framing. I acted as a teacher when I facilitated a conversation on the harmful, but prevalent nature of stereotypes. Rarely, I involved myself in the class without an explicit invitation. When I did so, it was with the express purpose of gaining insight into students' reading experiences by asking them to clarify something they had said. In total, I observed thirty-five class periods each approximately 45 minutes. With the exception of two classes when I could not be present, I observed every lesson that was related to the graphic narratives.

Interviews

According to Creswell (2007) focus group interviews are “advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other... [and] when individuals interviewed one-

on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (p. 133). Based on my own background as a secondary teacher, I had thought therefore that focus groups would be the most appropriate interview format for this study because it gave students the opportunity to discuss and compare their learning experiences, making their differences and similarities more distinct and overt. Though I had initially conceived of conducting three separate, formal group interviews with a core group of six to ten students, this did not materialize since it was too difficult to find a convenient time for everyone to meet and because some students were more comfortable being interviewed in smaller groups.

Seven students agreed to be interviewed as part of this study. These interviews were conducted either individually or in small groups outside of class, during homeroom, after-school, or online. The first of these interviews—with Aubrey, Jamal, Michael, and Latisha—was done in a group setting after-school in Sara’s classroom and took about 45 minutes to complete. The second interview—with Ashanti and Maria—took place during homeroom period in the teacher’s lounge and took about 30 minutes to complete. Both of these interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The third of these interviews—with Keisha—was conducted virtually using a chat feature on Facebook. It lasted a little over an hour and was later transcribed by saving the conversation on a word document. Though these students were officially interviewed on only one occasion, I kept up with them constantly and frequently interviewed them informally before and after class. During these brief sessions, I would focus on how they were responding to the graphic novel they were reading in class. Typically they would report what they were enjoying about the text or what aspects of it they were struggling with. In addition to

these informal interviews, I frequently interacted with them while they worked in class either in groups or independently.

In addition to these seven core students, I also had several opportunities to engage the entire class as a large focus group. During these whole class interviews/discussions, my questions were mostly derived from the research questions and sought to pinpoint how students experienced reading graphic narratives. Although I prompted them with some questions, the conversation usually flowed organically among the students as they made sense of their own learning experiences and responded to each other's comments. Occasionally, when these conversations veered off topic, I would redirect with a question or comment. These discussions, three in total, generally lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were mostly captured in my field notes, though one was audio-recorded and later transcribed. These numerous informal whole-class discussions were incredibly rich and were treated, data-wise, as interviews. Though most did not take up the offer, all students, as compensation for allowing me to conduct my study in their classroom, were offered an official letter outlining the nature of their participation in the study that was subsequently mailed to the college of their choice.

To help paint a rich portrait of these students as readers, the research study also included the perspective of their teacher, Sara. She was not only observed teaching in class, but also interviewed three times over the course of the study. These sessions varied in length ranging from 25 to 45 minutes and were always audio-recorded and later transcribed. The purpose of these interviews was to clarify Sara's instructional goals and discuss her observations of how the class was progressing. During this time, I frequently asked her follow-up questions based on my field notes or my analysis of student work. In

this way, developing interview questions was a generative process based on what was occurring in class, the data, and my early analysis. I was particularly interested in her perception of how students were responding to the course and how she shaped instruction to best meet their needs. In this way, I was able to document the instructional challenges she felt she faced as she tried to teach her students how to read graphic narratives successfully. Beyond the formal interviews, Sara and I communicated frequently, casually before and after class and via telephone and email. These conversations, unless specifically noted as unrelated to the study, were also treated as data.

Documents

According to Yin (2009), in “case studies the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 103). For this reason, numerous documents were accumulated as part of this study. These included Sara’s lesson plans and instructional materials and student work which I collected or photocopied with their consent. Student work was completed either individually for homework or exams or in groups during class time. The individual work I collected included homework sheets with their responses to reading comprehension questions, response papers, a midterm essay, and surveys.

Overall, three surveys were distributed to the entire class over the course of this study. The first one, given out as they read their first text, asked students to describe their personal experiences with graphica, specifically what titles, if any, they had read, and how they generally felt about reading comics in school. The second survey, given out about halfway through their study of *Maus*, asked students to describe how they read the text and to pinpoint any elements with which they either enjoyed or struggled. The final

survey, distributed on my last day of observations, asked students to reflect both on their experiences reading *Persepolis* and how their understanding of graphic narratives had evolved over the course of the study.

Artifacts

Similar to documents, physical artifacts or works of art were also collected and used as data. In terms of this study, most of the documents and artifacts categorically overlapped; for example, though students' creative writing is both a document and a work of art, it was catalogued as a document. There were only four distinct non-print artifacts collected over the course of this study. These included the photo journal essay, their show-and-tell object, and two cartoon strips. For their photo journal essay students worked to create a story using only images, focusing on how framing their shot represented a particular point-of-view and thereby editorialized the image. These images ranged from single-shots to multiple frames. I was not able to collect the second set of artifacts, but they were photographed and documented. These were objects they had brought in from home for their show vs. tell assignment and ranged from a sentimental broach to a favorite Hello Kitty pillow. The final two artifacts collected in this study were the two cartoon strips students created in groups, one to portray their experience reading *Maus* and the other to depict their experiences in school.

Data Analysis Procedures

The first step of data analysis consisted of reviewing my field notes and interview transcripts, noting preliminary ideas and interesting observations in the margins (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Then, I began "playing" with the data, highlighting instances where students either responded to the affordances of graphic narratives ("affordances")

or where instruction seemed to impact their understanding of this type of text (“instruction”). I then began breaking down the code “affordances” to see how students understood the unique elements of graphic narratives, specifically, how they navigated the geography of the page (“geography”) and used both print and image (“print/image”) in the meaning-making process.

Using the scholarship on graphic narratives as a guide (Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 2006), the “geography” code was eventually broken down into two sub-codes, one that catalogued instances of students navigating the page of the text (“navigate”) and one that looked at instances in which they practiced closure (“closure”) (Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 2006). The “print/image” code was also broken into two sub-codes, to see how students understood the diegetic (“diegetic”) and extradiegetic (“extradiegetic”) spaces of the texts (Bavinka, 2011; Hatfield, 2005). Within the “diegetic” code, I looked to see how students drew on both word and image to understand the comic-world, specifically its depiction of time (“time”), space (“space”), character (“character”), and plot (“plot”). In the “extradiegetic” code, I looked to see how students understood how the panels (“panels”), layout (“layout”), and aesthetic (“aesthetic”) shaped their understanding of the narrative. Through this analysis, I was able to describe how students responded to the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives.

For my second category of data, coded as “instruction,” I used the four-dimensions of the multiliteracies pedagogy—situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice—(The New London Group, 1996) to categorize instances of instruction and learning. For example, class conversation and activities that drew on students’ own life experiences were coded as situated practice (“SP”), instances

of explicit instruction, specifically the introduction of metalanguages to deconstruct the multimodal ways meaning is constructed, were coded as overt instruction (“OV”), instances in which learning was positioned within other socio-cultural contexts were coded as critical framing (“CF”), and finally, instances of instruction that re-situated learning within other cultural contexts were coded as transformed practice (“TP”).

Within the two categories, I then began grouping the codes until general patterns began emerging from the data. Within the first category, these patterns revealed how the class generally responded to the different textual affordances of graphic narratives. It highlighted which affordances they struggled to comprehend and which they understood more easily, without additional support. Throughout this process, I also documented exceptions, noting students whose experiences differed from the majority of the class (e.g. who seemed to enjoy certain textual elements that the rest did not). These patterns ultimately responded to my first research question and formed the basis of chapter 4. I then looked at the second category of data to see how student learning was impacted by instruction. To do this, I returned to the codes and analyzed instances of teaching that seemed to directly affect how students understood the graphic narratives. I repeated this analysis, until a pattern began to emerge and indicated where opportunities for learning graphic narratives had been utilized and it had been limited. These findings ultimately responded to my second research question and formed the basis of chapter 5.

Researcher’s Role

In this study, my role was strictly that of an outside researcher. To ensure that students felt comfortable sharing their work with me, I worked hard, from the start of the study, to establish myself as a nonthreatening presence. As a former teacher, I was

expecting to face total disinterest and even cynicism about the study, so I made special efforts to form relationships with students, greeting them in the hallway, talking to them about their interests, and even sharing elements of my own personal life with them. I made an effort to interact with the class in a friendly manner, chat with students before and after class, and even assist them, when invited, during class. In this way, I was able to establish what seemed to be an open and honest relationship with most of the students. I believe that, overall, students accepted my presence and were quite open with me.

I also actively worked to make my study transparent and inviting, frequently asking students questions to clarify their writing, class work, or comments they had made in class. In this vein, I also presented myself as an outside researcher, as an aggregator rather than interpreter of their experiences. During interviews, I assured students that their privacy was protected and that they would suffer no consequence for whatever information they shared. These steps helped me become part of the class community and ultimately, position students not only as ‘participants in a research study,’ but also as agents of their own learning.

In addition to encouraging the participants to accept me within the classroom community, I was also careful to keep an open mind when working with the data. I have always loved comics and have been an avid reader of graphic novels for a number of years. Additionally, I have had very positive experiences working with graphic novels in educational settings. When Sara’s students initially responded poorly to the graphic narratives, their reaction was somewhat unexpected and even distressing. Though I had not realized it, I had been expecting them to react much more positively to the texts. In recognizing this, I stayed conscious of my own expectation and assumptions within a

personal field journal which ultimately helped me keep my biases about working with graphic novels in check.

Limitations

Because this study focuses on the reading experiences of one class, findings are case specific and therefore non-generalizable. To help increase the relevance of the data, a “thick, rich description...of the setting, the participants, and the themes” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128) has been provided. This method is designed to establish credibility by giving “readers the feeling that they have experienced or could experience, the events described in the study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). In addition, because only one researcher is involved in this study, the data collected is limited in scope and subjective in nature.

Trustworthiness

In trying to prevent ‘tunnel vision’ that can result from having only one pair of eyes in the room, I conducted several member checks with which to verify my findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The first member check was carried out during my interviews and frequent conversations with students in which I always paraphrased their thoughts and asked them to clarify what they had shared. In this way, I was very transparent with what I was finding and frequently asked them to weigh in with their perspective and to correct me if I had misrepresented their experiences or perspectives. I always tried to make clear to students that it was my intention to make this study about *their* learning experiences and that no one knows better than they do what aided them in this process. This kind of communication helped me ensure that I was indeed capturing students’ learning experiences and building the trustworthiness of the data.

Another important member check that I employed was carried out at the conclusion of the study at which point I presented to the whole-class a sketch of my preliminary findings and invited them to provide feedback. As a final check, I also shared my work with a colleague who acted as a “critical friend” and was open to her “alternative explanations and suggestions for [the] data” (Yin, 2009, p. 72). In general, throughout this study, I have worked hard to keep both an open mind and open lines of communication with all participants, including Sara. I hope that in staying self-reflective and conscious of where I am at as a researcher, my findings capture students’ perspectives on learning graphic narratives.

In addition, I triangulated my findings by providing “corroborating evidence collected through multiple methods, such as observations, interviews, and documents” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). This helped ensure that my findings are in fact supported by a wide range of sources. Hopefully, these actions build the trustworthiness of the study and make the findings relevant and useful to the larger research community.

CHAPTER FOUR: “I GET SO ADD READING COMICS”: HOW GRAPHIC NOVELS CHALLENGE READERS

The graphic novel is commonly thought of as an easily accessible text because it conveys meaning through both words and images (Krashen, 2005; McTaggart, 2005; Mendez, 2004). Although written using the comics format but having book-like features, the graphic novel is neither a typical comic book nor a traditional print book. It has unique textual elements that can make it challenging to read. Reading a graphic narrative successfully typically requires a number of specific skills including the ability to negotiate “the dance” (Storace, 2005) of word and image, to navigate the page surface (McCloud, 2006), to practice closure (Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 2006), and understand the diegetic and extradiegetic spaces of the text (Bavinka, 2011; Hatfield, 2005). These skills, which are specific to the graphic novel, are not automatically in place even for proficient readers.

This chapter will highlight how this type of text not only differs from traditional books, but has unique textual affordances which can challenge the untrained reader. The chapter will first address some of the initial challenges the class confronted when working with graphic narratives. Then, it will explore how students struggled to navigate the page surface, practice closure, and understand the diegetic and extradiegetic spaces of the texts. In documenting how Sara’s class responded to the graphic novels, this chapter documents that special skills may be required to access these more distinctive textual features. The data will also indicate that some of these skills may be easily acquired while others may necessitate special training or support.

Confronting Early Conceptions of Text

In their very first lesson using graphic novels, students worked in groups to come up with a working definition of comics. They struggled with this task and most ultimately suggested some variation on one group's definition which stated that "comics are shorter stories that pinpoint on the main scenes [and that are] visually funny and have less details." Afterwards, in a class discussion, students elaborated on their definitions; almost all perceived comics as "easy," "fun," and even "the opposite of a *real* book." This last point, that comics are somehow less legitimate than a 'regular' book, was a reoccurring issue that students repeatedly confronted, grappled with, and ultimately seemed to resolve. When asked, they seemed unable to offer any particular reason why they thought graphic narratives were less legitimate texts. For example, Ayala said, "I just don't believe [that reading graphic novels is] a true form of reading." When I questioned what she meant, she simply shrugged her shoulders and said, "I don't know, it just isn't reading." Many of the students conceptualized text using highly specific criteria and argued that 'real books' contain only words, are lengthy, and address mature issues and interests. To these students, graphic novels violated their conceptions of 'high quality' literature, and therefore, did not belong in a high school classroom.

This class conversation revealed that students not only perceived graphic narratives as being easy and illegitimate, but childish as well. While discussing her group's definition, Latisha expressed frustration with the idea of reading graphic narratives in school at all, arguing that "reading a picture book or a comic book when you're older is a little immature. When I see a 40-year-old woman on the train reading a comic book, I think, wow, she's really immature." Another student, Marisol, an avid

reader, echoed her sentiment, saying, “American comic books are really geared toward younger boys with superheroes saving the world.” Similarly Gabrielle reported, “I have older aunts and uncles that read comic books and they love them because they play videogames.” Many students initially agreed with Latisha, Marisol, and Gabrielle, believing that comics were basically unsophisticated books for preadolescent boys or for immature adults. In expressing these opinions, they were perhaps echoing both the mainstream perception of comics (Hatfield, 2005; Wright, 2001) and the position presumably held by the school itself (in which non-print texts are rarely included in the classroom).

Though the majority of the class held this opinion, there were some notable exceptions. A small group of students were passionate about comics—especially Japanese comics called manga—and frequently read them at home. In an interview, Maria and Ashanti, the most avid of this group, reported that they were “huge” manga fans and were planning to attend a manga convention later that year. Despite their enjoyable interactions with *graphica*, neither Ashanti nor Maria was initially enthusiastic about studying graphic novels in class. In a later interview, I learned that these two students not only identified themselves as avid readers, but also thoroughly differentiated their home reading practices from their school ones. For this reason, they very much enjoyed reading *graphica* outside of school; they did not like the prospect of reading this kind of text within the confines of their ELA classroom. This initial resistance, evident even among the few fans of comics, caught Sara off-guard as she was expecting the graphic novels to be “something fun... that would help excite them about reading.”

Initial Challenges

Though students initially expressed resistance to reading graphic narratives in school, once they started reading the texts, this feeling gave way to confusion and frustration. Sara had taken special precautions to select an introductory text with which she believed would help her students ease into the format. Required to teach a text that focused on September 11th, Sara had a choice between two excellent, but very different graphic narratives: *In the Shadow of No Towers* and *The 9/11 Report*. Though Sara had taught *In the Shadow of No Towers* the previous year, she felt that the oversized pages and dense avant-garde layout would be too difficult for her current class of novices. In contrast, *The 9/11 Report* has an objective, newsy perspective and abides by the comics format in a much more traditional way. Despite Sara's decision to use the more straightforward text, many students struggled to navigate *The 9/11 Report* successfully. In one class discussion, Aubrey captured this frustration, declaring:

I get so ADD reading comics, I don't know even how I am supposed to read them. There's too much going on. I don't know where to look first: up, down, around? It would be so much easier if it were just words in a row like a regular book.

While reading *The 9/11 Report*, the perception of graphic narratives as "easy" was quickly dispelled and shifted to "annoyingly hard."

Although they were not generally enthusiastic about reading graphic narratives, students did not immediately give up on them either. Most of them considered themselves to be good readers and writers, and there was quite a bit of evidence supporting this evaluation. First, this class was a creative writing elective and required teacher recommendation. Second, I oftentimes observed students reading non-school books before or after class, and on one occasion, discussing what they had read over the

weekend. Recognizing that *The 9/11 Report* challenged them, the class worked hard to tackle the text. They reported applying numerous comprehension strategies (such as activating prior knowledge, making predictions, and skimming), few of which seemed to help them read the text successfully. In a response paper, China wrote “it was kind of difficult [to apply comprehension strategies to *The 9/11 Report*] because I still wasn’t sure how to read it... I thought I could figure it out if I had looked at the pictures because there were more pictures and then skimmed the headings and conversation bubbles... [but] this only helped me a little.”

Despite their attempts to do what “good readers do,” most students struggled to read *The 9/11 Report* because they were unsure how to deal with the unique affordances of this type of text. In various forms, this frustration remained, even once they moved on to *Understanding Comics* and *Maus*. In this section I will discuss some of the particular areas students struggled with and how these challenges impacted their overall understanding and appreciation of graphic novels.

Difficulties Reading the Page Surface

Though they initially conceived of graphic narratives as being easy, students very quickly encountered difficulty reading graphic novels. On the second day of reading *The 9/11 Report*, a majority of the class reported that they found the text to be, as one student said, “chaotic and confusing.” Specifically they were unsure “how to follow [the page, because] there’s a lot going on.” Though a handful of students were familiar with the comics format and could generally navigate the page successfully, they too occasionally expressed frustration and experienced some challenges while reading. In this section, I will focus on how the graphic novel can potentially challenge readers by highlighting

how Sara's class struggled to navigate the page layout, practice closure, and integrate the diegetic and extradiegetic spaces within the narrative.

Navigating the Page Surface

For the uninitiated readers, navigating the page layout and picking the correct sequence in which to read the panels proved to be difficult. Students mostly used a system of trial and error. For example, one day while reading aloud *The 9/11 Report*, Latisha was unsure of which panel to read next, so she picked one of the adjoining ones and read it; then, realizing the sequence was off, she backtracked and picked an alternative route. Students devised all sorts of methods for navigating the layout. This brief exchange between Latisha, Aubrey, and Marisol illustrates their struggle to find the best approach:

Marisol: Let's just say that some of the panels, like on page 77, I'm not sure if I should read up or down, so I just read the surrounding ones first and then sort of build the story as I go, figuring out where to take the next step.

Latisha: I just read left-to-right and follow through, like the story thread.

Aubrey: Right, I kind of do the same thing except on page 77 there's a huge box dominating the page, so it's still hard to know exactly where to go from there.

When readers cannot navigate the layout properly or when they expend too much cognitive energy trying to do so, they struggle to keep track of the narrative thread. In a class

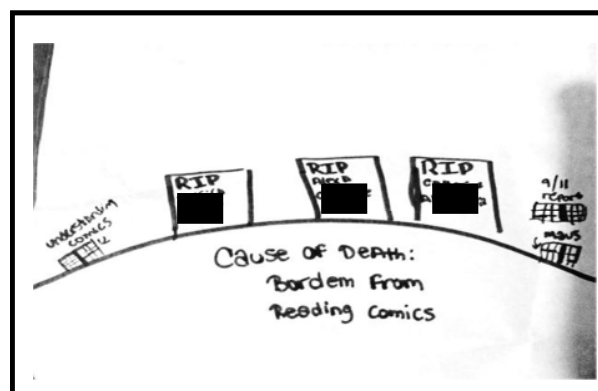


Figure 1. In an activity where they created their own cartoons reflecting their experience reading *Maus*, this group depicted feelings of boredom, and even death. In this drawing, students' names appear on the headstones.

activity reflecting on their reading of *Maus*, one group described this dilemma:

The [graphic novel] format is new and different. However, the format can also be difficult, [especially] trying to figure out what order to read in and what panel comes next...At times we just didn't know which direction to read in...[and] just got confused.

This struggle, to navigate the page successfully, impacted how students felt about the text generally. In an activity where they created their own cartoons reflecting their experience reading *Maus*, two out of four groups depicted feelings of frustration, boredom, and even death (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). In fairness, it is important to note that of the two remaining, one depicted an enthusiastic response to *Maus*, and the other a divided one. These cartoons seemed to indicate that even after reading three graphic narratives, students were not only still struggling to read the texts, but these difficulties seemed to also be affecting their overall appreciation and enjoyment of the material.

Most of the class preferred reading *The 9/11 Report* when the panels were displayed linearly because it required less navigation and made the content more accessible. Though most students expressed some frustration with the changing layouts of the text, there was one notable exception. In a class discussion, Ashanti reported that she preferred reading *The 9/11 Report* when the layout “switched things up” because it

helped her stay more engaged with the material.

Interestingly, after completing their last graphic novel, *Persepolis*, several students, most notably Latisha and

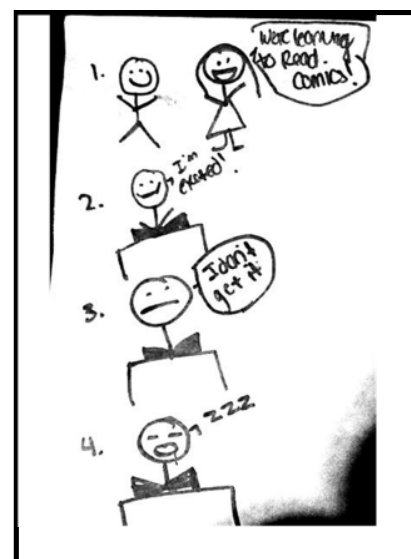


Figure 2. In an activity where they created their own cartoons reflecting their experience reading *Maus*, this group depicted feelings of excitement giving way to frustration and disinterest.

Brianna, seemed to share Ashanti's perspective:

Latisha: [Graphic novels] make you step out of your comfort zone with reading books. [When you read a graphic novel] you're balancing how to read words and pictures at the same time—following the content properly—reading from left to right not just reading completely down in one way. Sometimes it's down, then it's back up, and then it's left-right... It makes my mind really work to keep up.

Brianna: I feel like what Latisha said. When you read [a regular book] sometimes when you're reading you're not really reading what you're reading-- like while you're reading, you're thinking "Hey, what am I going to do this weekend?"...but when you're reading graphic novels you really have to pay attention to what you're doing 'cause you know if you're not you miss stuff. And then you look and you're like what's going on because you're reading the wrong panel. So I feel like you really have to pay attention when you're doing it.

Although many students, like Latisha and Brianna, initially experienced a great deal of frustration navigating the page surface, this feeling was not shared by everyone and ultimately changed over time.

Practicing Closure

In comics, the reader must actively incorporate the panels and gutters into a cohesive narrative whole, closing the "discrete images and fashion[ing] them into a continuous narrative – filling in the blanks, as it were, between individual images" (Considine, 1994, para. 7; see also McCloud, 2006; Sousanis, 2011). Without the reader actively practicing closure or "connecting the dots," the story becomes lost and "the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention, not inherent connectedness" (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41). To practice closure and to read graphic narratives successfully

requires a set of “learned competencies” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41) that are typically developed over time through repeated exposure and interactions with comics.

Though every comic is constructed using these principles, the “closing distance” varies from text to text. In some comics, the breakdowns—narrative distance between the panels—are straightforward and the narrative distance between the panels is incremental and uses “strong visual repetition and/or verbal cuing [to make] the connections between the images immediate or at least fairly obvious” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 41). In other texts, the narrative distance between panels is much greater and the reader must work harder to read the visual and verbal cues to piece the story together. Students read the text most successfully when the panels were embedded with repetitive text or visual cues (like consistent backgrounds), which helped them practice closure. For example, they had little trouble following the opening chapter of *Persepolis* because the panels are visually consistent in their depiction of Marji’s school.

In contrast, when the narrative breakdowns are not as straightforward, students struggled to “take an active part in constructing a flow of events from discontinuous pages” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 43). On these occasions, students had to consciously draw on the words and images in the panels to practice closure effectively. For example, almost all of the students reported having the most difficult time reading McCloud’s theoretical work *Understanding Comics*. While McCloud himself appears on the page to guide the reader through the material, the text is non-narrative, meaning there is less visual cohesion between the panels. As a result, students not only had to close a much wider panel-to-panel distance, but also had to use McCloud’s theoretical principles, rather than a storyline, to do so.

As they became more familiar with comics and grew more proficient at practicing closure, students became more aware of their role within the meaning-making process:

China: I feel that reading comics is a more gradual reading process because it doesn't give you everything at once. Everything is broken up, you have the words, pictures, the panels and you have to read it bit by bit.

Ashanti: With a comic you can sort of build your interpretation over time... [because] the meaning of a comic is always changing; it moves over time.

Being more aware of the meaning-making process helped some students feel more engaged with the material. In a response paper, Devonte wrote, "The graphic novel breaks everything down step-by-step, time-by-time to give us a better understanding...it's much more intense and you can almost feel what's going on."

Likewise, Brianna compared her experience reading *The 9/11 Report* to watching a news reel of September 11th:

It does something different when you have to put it together in your own mind rather than a TV splicing together a news reel. By putting it together in your own mind it makes you more emotional - you're more connected...you have to take time to put it together. When you're watching a video you just passively watch it...you're just looking at it. When you're reading pictures, you have to spend the time putting it all together...you're more invested.

Similarly, toward the end of *Maus*, someone mentioned the movie *The Pianist* and a particular scene in which Nazi soldiers throw a wheelchair-bound man off a balcony. In the subsequent class discussion, students compared the different effects the two mediums have on the reader/viewer:

Marisol: I think the difference between seeing it on a movie and reading it/seeing it in a graphic novel is that in a picture (in the graphic novel) it would be a piece of time frozen. It wouldn't actually be happening; it would just be frozen there. In a movie, it happens

but you don't have any control over it...the movie is basically doing it for you.

Ashanti: Yeah, but when [you read a graphic novel] your mind would actually have to create the fall... so you can alter the severity of it, I guess, and make it less hard [of a fall]...but ultimately you'd be causing the fall to happen [in your own mind].

Though eventually students did become quite proficient at reading the verbal and visual cues within and across the panels to practice closure; this ability developed over time and took some effort.

Understanding the Diegetic and Extradiegetic Spaces of the Texts

In this section, I will explore how students struggled to draw on both words and images to understand the diegetic and extradiegetic spaces of the comics. Diegetic space refers to what is happening in the panels, the world within the comic itself—the characters, the spaces they inhabit and the things they do—“basically, the stuff happening in the comic as if it were its own reality, not a story on page” (Bavinka, 2011, para. 2). Extradiegetic space refers to the meta-story, the ways in which the page is constructed, how the panels, gutters, and layouts shape and provide insight into the plot. A good way of conceptualizing these different spaces is to imagine a movie and the effect of a song being played on a character's car radio (diegetic) versus when the same song is played over the top of the film as a part of its score (extradiegetic) (Bavinka, 2011). In comics, the story itself is one mode of expression (diegetic) and the *way* the story is expressed is another (extradiegetic). Like film, comics “balance storytelling between these two narrative spaces... [and] one should analyze both of these spaces as independent narrative elements as well as how they relate to each other in an overall meaning” (Bavinka, 2011, para. 2). In this way, diegetic and extradiegetic space relate to and inform one another

and the successful reader integrates both of these narrative strands simultaneously. For the purpose of clarifying the data, I will distinguish between students' understandings of diegetic and extradiegetic space.

Understanding narrative embedded within diegetic space. To read the diegetic space of comics successfully requires the reader to balance two “codes of signification” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 134), two different sets of symbols— the verbal and the visual— at the same time. When reading comics, it is important not to think of the words and images in binary terms because images, much like words, cannot simply be received; they must be decoded. Additionally, words can also be “visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 133). In this way, “comics, like other hybrid texts, collapse the word/image dichotomy: visible language has the potential to be quite elaborate in appearance, forcing recognition of pictorial and material qualities that can be freighted with meaning...conversely, images can be simplified and codified to function as a language” (Hatfield, 2005, p. 133). Reading solely the words or images in a comic is equivalent to watching a movie with just the audio or just the visual; neither approach is enough nor ideal.

Students initially did not see the fundamental relationship between words and images and therefore considered the images to be illustrative of the text, not themselves independently contributing to the narrative. For this reason, some students reported that they read either the pictures or the words but rarely both, indicating that they believed that the reader had a choice in reading graphic narratives—they could either choose the ‘word’ or the ‘image’ path:

- Keisha: I read all the words and if I read something shocking, I'll stop and look at the pictures. [Otherwise,] I'm skipping pictures all the time.
- Aubrey: Yeah, the pictures just reinforce what it says—but I always look at the picture right after I read it.
- Michael: I read panel-to-panel—I take both in together.
- Aubrey: But that slows my reading down too much.
- Samah: Not me, the pictures are right there- I *have* to look at them as I read!

Instead of recognizing the visual-verbal relationship within the comics, most of the novice readers acted on learned assumptions about the roles of words and images. For example, students often prioritized text while casting images into a more supporting role. One class discussion, on an article exploring the unique drawing style of *Persepolis*, highlighted this issue:

- Latisha: It's saying that [*Persepolis*] uses less pictures.
- Sara: It's not saying less or more pictures- it's just saying what the purpose of the pictures are—the function of the pictures is not to illustrate the text.
- Ashanti: I still don't get it.
- Latisha: Me neither.
- Sara: I don't know how to explain it... the purpose of the pictures [in *Persepolis*] is not to supplement the story like in a picture book—the pictures also tell a story.
- Ashanti: I still don't understand what that means. So the pictures are not the same as the words?

Though eventually students, like Brianna, learned that “you really have to make sure you read the pictures and the words to get what you are reading,” this ability took some time

to develop. In order to tap into how students came to use words and images to understand the more nuanced elements of diegetic space, I will collapse the comics-world into distinct building blocks and analyze how students used multiple modes to understand how graphic novels depict time, space, plot, and character.

In comics, time is portrayed graphically, primarily within the physical confines of the panels (McCloud, 1993). Occasionally, however, time is also depicted through the layout or extradiegetic space of the text. Here, time does not refer to sequencing, but how readers utilize verbal and visual cues to establish either a sense of historical context (e.g. *Maus* and *Persepolis*) or to recognize the passing of time within the comic world (e.g. the next day, a week later, etc.). In the graphic novels used in Sara's class, history is typically conveyed through the textual details, specifically through objects that appear within the panels. For example, at various points in *Maus*, Spiegelman employs a scrapbooking technique in which he overlays artifacts— pictures, maps, movie posters, and train tickets—onto various the panels. Spiegelman, who painstakingly worked to render these details historically accurate (Franklin, 2011), uses them to establish a sense of historicity and to anchor the story in its WWII setting. In class, little attention was paid to these historical details. As a result, students missed opportunities to explore the world of the Holocaust in as relevant and meaningful way possible.

Though they struggled with how graphic novels establish a sense of history, students easily picked up on how comics indicate movements in time. For example, in *Maus*' disjointed chapter "Prisoner of the Hell Planet," students utilized the verbal and visual cues to recognize that the chapter had moved back in time. When I questioned one group of students about how they knew this they said:

- Maria: The pictures here suddenly look like a distorted nightmare.
- Ashanti: Yeah, because in the regular parts of *Maus* there's a lot of white space...that's sort of letting in the light into the scenes. Here all the extra space is dark...black...almost as if there's no hope, no light in this story at all.
- Michael: There's a lot of shadows and shading here—[which] makes it seem very dark to match a very dark subject. It just doesn't seem to flow with the rest of what was going on...
- Devonte: Yeah, this chapter is like a dark corner of [Spiegelman's] mind...I realized it was out of place because it didn't flow with the rest of the story- it just suddenly became something new- I had to think of how it connected to what I had just read.

Students similarly missed verbal and visual clues to understand the use of space within the graphic narratives. Within the comic world, space is typically used to locate the story or to explain or highlight a concept or idea (as it is used in *Understanding Comics*). This information is conveyed through different spatial layers within the panel, primarily within the background and the foreground of the cell. Foreground refers to whatever is in the spotlight, where “the main action takes place” (Fairrington, 2009, p. 265), and typically appears in the front and center of the panel. Background includes everything that is not in the foreground and is generally reserved to establish the larger context (e.g. the placement or location of the action) or to create a mood or atmosphere (as in *Persepolis*). A helpful way to visualize these differences is to imagine a movie scene in which two actors (foreground) perform in front of a richly detailed set (background). In comics, the dialogue between the actors can be as important as the set they are standing in front of. Some texts, like *Maus*, inhabit richly narrative spaces while in other texts, like *Persepolis*, the background is sparse, if not at times, oddly absent. In

this way, it is important for readers to recognize that different comics employ space in different ways for different purposes. For example, in *Maus*, space is used as an avenue through which Spiegelman visually expands and explores the story. In an interview he elaborated on this point:

In a prose story, I could just write, ‘Then they dragged my father through the gate and into the camp.’ But here I have to live those words, to assimilate them, to turn them into finished business—so that I end up *seeing* them and am then able to convey that vision. Were there tufts of grass, ruts in the path, puddles in the ruts? How tall were the buildings, how many windows, any bars, any lights in the windows, any people? What time of day was it? What was the horizon like? Every panel requires that I interrogate my material like that over and over again. (Franklin, 2011, para. 5)

At first, students struggled to recognize how space located the story. For example, while reading aloud *The 9/11 Report*, Latisha complained that she was “totally lost in the story and had no idea where we were at.” It soon became clear that Latisha had failed to notice Big Ben in the background. Because she had missed that clue, Latisha missed the shift in location. (Although it is also possible that she did not recognize Big Ben as a British icon.) Eventually, students grew more adept at doing this. For example, they were able to recognize when *Maus* changed locations between Poland and Queens and when *Persepolis* shifted between the real world and Marji’s imagination. Indicating their progress, students even created their own space, or location, when none was provided for them. For example, in one scene in *Persepolis*, though there is no background, students ‘read’ the cries of protesters and envisioned the space they were standing in front of:

Latisha: I hear the sounds of the revolution and protests. I can see them at the square marching in lines with signs and stuff like Occupy Wall Street.

Samah: Yeah, I definitely see the one's shouting
'freedom'...in front of buildings, cars, in the streets
there's lots of shouting.

Though they had little difficulty using space to locate the texts, students occasionally missed opportunities to explore some of more subtle ways graphic narratives employ space. For example, in *Maus*, as the main characters try to escape by walking to another town, the four paths set before them resemble a swastika as if to indicate that no matter what path they took they would be confronted by the Nazis. Students only saw the swastika shape after it was pointed out to them, and even then, they were unsure how it spoke to both the physical and psychological space of the characters. Similarly, they never quite grasped how the background and foreground of the panel work to establish space in different ways. Typically, they treated the space within the panel as single narrative block, without discerning between different spatial layers. One notable exception to this trend was Devonte who did take the time to read the background as a separate narrative entity:

I learned that even the background is important in a picture, it can also tell a story. This activity definitely changed the way I look at pictures because now I'll look in the background of the picture more than [at] the actual person or object of interest. Graphic novels are now more complex [to me] so now I take time to read and interpret the background images...There's so much more than the speech bubbles, there's actually mini-stories being told using only the background.

Like time and space, plot is also conveyed through both words and images. Because comics often tell a lot of story in very little space, authors typically rely on a rich vocabulary of symbols and icons to convey meaning and to signal "a person, place, thing, or idea" (McCloud, 1993, p. 27). These symbols are not necessarily strictly pictorial as words can also be used as icons (McCloud, 1993). Occasionally, students misinterpreted

a symbol or an icon which affected their overall understanding of the plot. For example, when reading *The 9/11 Report*, students initially misinterpreted a stand-in symbol for “loss of communication”—a crucial detail in the story of the 9/11—which in turn affected how they understood the plot.

As they grew more proficient at reading comics, students became enthused “panel detectives” and searched high and low for clues that explained, elaborated, or contradicted their understanding of the plot. They began to notice the lines surrounding the text (jagged for screaming and rounded for “speaking regular”) and picked up on a range of emotions from the fonts. As Keisha put it, “textual components that were in caps or italicized helped me understand the story more because I knew when the tone changed from serious to calm or sad to angry or happy.”

In addition to reading the textual clues, students became even more adept at reading pictorial symbols and icons. For example while reading *Persepolis*, Aubrey questioned why Marji was embarrassed to be seen driving around town in a Cadillac. In a group conversation, they discussed how the Cadillac, a status symbol, did not jive with the character’s view of social equity and economic equality. They later analyzed a dream sequence and determined that the lion was a symbol for the Shah’s regime (they were unaware that the lion is a symbol used by the Persian Empire). They then connected this panel to the one before it, determining that the sun was symbolic of God because that “connects the conversation back to her recent conversation with her dad about God.” Though at times students lacked the historical knowledge with which to decode the pictures (e.g. the lion in *Persepolis*), they generally progressed in recognizing the visual

and verbal codes used within the panels and drew on these details to establish a coherent plot.

Students also became much more aware of how the visual and verbal details within the panel altered or amplified the storyline. For example, a good portion of them immediately noticed a raised eyebrow in *Persepolis* that seemed to ironize what the character was saying. In another panel of the book, Marji's mother is shown being photographed at a protest. Though the next panel says only, "and wore dark glasses for a long time," the suspended heads shown within the background reminded Ashanti of the type of constant surveillance seen in the show *Big Brother*. This observation expanded the class' understanding of the character's anxiety, offering more insight into the source of her fear and the growing tensions in Iran. Another episode that illustrates students' growing proficiency at using text and image to create plot was when Gabrielle noticed an American flag draped over two beds in a panel of *Persepolis*. She argued that this was evidence of how the Satrapis—the main character's family—growing westernization and supported this argument by noting that in the same scene some of the characters are discussing *Star Wars*. In making this argument, Gabrielle had to connect multiple images (one bedspread was striped the other had stars) and character dialogue, indicating that she was becoming more proficient at connecting various pieces of information to make meaning of the text.

Students also noticed moments of action in which words and images seemed to contradict one another. For example, Latisha noticed the contradiction between the pictures and words in a military recruitment scene in *Persepolis* in which "they were basically telling the boys there would be opportunity for them—women, and money... all

these poor boys- and then they get to the training camp and you can see in the pictures, it's totally not what they claimed [it would be]." In another panel of *Persepolis*, students realized that although the text indicated that Marji's family was feeling carefree, the visual cues within the panel— an encircling dragon— contradicted that sentiment.

As students became more aware of how these dual codes could change their understanding of the plot, they also had to learn to verify their interpretations. For example while reading *The 9/11 Report*, Aubrey detected a conspiracy theory in the "smirking" expressions of the FAA officials. This suggestion sparked a heated debate, gained a strong following, and contradicted the very purpose of *The 9/11 Report*, which was to make the 9/11 Commission's findings accessible and transparent. This episode illustrates that picking up on the visual and verbal clues embedded within the panels is only the first level of textual awareness. Students also had to achieve a second level of awareness, a kind of analytical checkpoint that prevented them from making snap judgments and creating meanings that were not verified in the text. Working together and having time to discuss what they read in class gave students the opportunity to do this. For example, on one occasion, while discussing Marji's dreams of becoming a prophet, the students worked together to make meaning from integrating print and visual messages:

Samah: I don't understand why she doesn't want to be a prophet anymore. Didn't she just tell God that she'll be his prophet? So suddenly, she has no interest in it...I don't get this kid!

Aubrey: Oh my god, you totally missed the thought bubble above her head! She's really lying to her parents about the prophet thing because she knows they won't believe her and they'll think she's crazy.

Samah: You're right. I can't believe I missed that!

Like time, space, and plot, character is portrayed within the diegetic space through words and pictures. Here, I will highlight how students understood three elements of characterization: how the character looks, acts, and interacts with other characters within the comic-world. This section will focus on Vladek, a central character of *Maus*. Though students were successful at building nuanced portraits of other characters in other texts, I selected Vladek because he is not only a richly complex character, but one that students worked particularly hard to relate to and understand. In *Maus*, Spiegelman employs a potent visual metaphor in which all the characters are portrayed as animals; each species represents of a different ethnicity. Vladek, the author's father and a Jew, is portrayed throughout the story as a mouse. Though students understood that Vladek was based on a real person, they struggled to connect to his experience because of his portrayal as a mouse:

Ashanti: The mice are still not humans, they're human-like, but not people. For me, there's an emotional disconnect. Sometimes I feel like they're human, but I'm not sure why [the author] did that because it definitely creates distance between the reader and the text...doesn't he want us to really feel what's going on?

Brianna: Yeah, but it's easier to read...but I hear you, it does take away some of that human aspect.

Aubrey: I think putting animals in as people gives you this weird sense of comfort and security because you're not actually seeing people getting slaughtered; so there's this psychological distance going on.

Although some students felt that Vladek's depiction as a mouse prevented them from truly connecting to his experiences, his unique speech and style of dress had the opposite

effect. Throughout *Maus*, Vladek speaks with a heavy Eastern European accent which sets him apart from the large cast of characters. Samah felt that “his accent makes his story seem more real.” Similarly, Ashanti felt his glasses “helped her identify with him and keep spotting him in the text.” Though students did eventually understand and connect to Spiegelman’s visual metaphor as a commentary on prejudice, it was initially the small details, like his glasses and accent, which helped them identify and build a rich character portrait of Vladek.

Students also learned a great deal from Vladek’s actions; they made numerous connections between what he said (verbally) and did (visually). For example, Jamal noticed that Vladek is frequently on an exercise bike or taking pills while he is sharing his story with Art, suggesting that he needs to iterate his vitality each time he revisits his memories of sadness and death. Building off Jamal’s thoughtful interpretation, Maria noted that Vladek seemed to have a problem with peripheral vision which she connected to a war injury that is depicted earlier in the text. She then suggested that Vladek’s experiences might have affected his “vision,” or perspective, because whenever he shares his memories of the Holocaust, he seems to become so immersed in that reality that he frequently confuses Art with his older son Richieu, who perished in the Holocaust.

Students also learned a great deal about Vladek from his interactions with other characters in the book. They used both pictures and words to understand the complex relationships Vladek had with his first wife Anja and his son, Art. For example, the chapter that addresses Anja’s suicide is accompanied with an actual photograph of her. Students analyzed this photograph, which is of her wearing a bathing suit, and compared it to how Vladek speaks of her in the rest of the book. Similarly, after his mother’s death,

Art is seen holding his father like a small child, lending some insight into their complex relationship. Ashanti noted that “it’s very strange when you start looking at your parents in that way...I got that the two had their differences, but here you see that Vladek sometimes acts like a child and that Art sometimes has to be the parent... which is something you see he resents a little later on.” In this way, students became quite proficient at using subtle textual clues, both verbal and visual, to make sense of the characters which ultimately helped them understand the text better.

Understanding narrative embedded within extradiegetic space. The previous section looked at how students used both words and images to make sense of the diegetic space within the graphic novels. In this section, I will explore how students struggled to comprehend the elements of narrative embedded within the extradiegetic space. In other words, how students understood that the structure and layout of the text impacted and shaped the story.

According to McCloud (2006) comics achieve their ultimate goal of reader comprehension through clear communication. This clarity is achieved in five kinds of “artistic choices” that are key to “conveying clarity and communication [in comics]” (p. 9): choice of moment, choice of frame, choice of image, choice of word, and choice of flow. In other words, McCloud argues that every minute detail within the text reflects a larger decision of its author. In this way, comics are, by definition, editorial in nature. While all texts are comprised of authorial decisions, in comics these choices are far more numerous and intrusive, permeating every layer of the text and effectively molding the reading experience. Shifting just one of these elements, such as the layout of the page, changes not only the reading environment, but the story itself.

One of the most fundamental “choices” made by a graphic novelist is how they will frame their work. Every story, graphic or not, is essentially framed by the experiences, interpretations, and opinions of its author. For the most part, students did not fully grasp this larger framing because it did not affect their reading reality. For example, while they understood that Marji was a child in *Persepolis*, they did not understand how this framing of ‘childhood’ affected the larger story. They did not see how Satrapi’s amateur drawing style reflected this sense of childhood or changed the nature of the events depicted in the book. They did not see how *Persepolis* is in fact not about the Iranian Revolution per se, but about, as its subtitle indicates, “the story of a childhood,” how a child experiences, identifies with, and comes to understand the political turmoil and social unrest around her. For this reason, when they analyzed the panels, they did not consistently use this lens of childhood which affected their overall understanding of the text.

Comics also frame stories in much more literal ways than traditional texts do. This is because in each panel the author opens a window into the comic-world. According to Lefèvre (2006) this type of framing is extremely powerful as a narrative device because it allows comic creators to “limit what someone sees in the panel— [he can] cut pictures off or hide elements... [and] by limiting the scope of the viewer and therefore the available information, he can cause the reader to make wrong inferences” (para. 1). Though they initially struggled to understand this concept, a hands-on project that involved frames and photography seemed to help. Eventually, students grew more proficient at recognizing the importance of framing and by the time they read *Maus*; most were able to discuss how the elements within a single panel framed or shaped the text.

For example, in one activity, students analyzed a panel in which a large *Maus*-mouse (a character mouse from the book) is seen holding a larger, more realistic mouse in front of an image of Mickey Mouse:

- Sara: Why do you think the author is showing you all these elements? What do you think he's trying to say here?
- Aubrey: Maybe Mickey Mouse is meant to represent the armed US forces? Art, the big mouse, has human hands represents a Jewish man—he's also in the center of the panel. The other mouse is the lowest from the middle—maybe representing the Jews in concentration camps while Mickey Mouse is the hope of the American forces?
- Maria: Mickey Mouse could also represent what was going on with the rest of the world; the rest of the world was just unaware and "happy"- isolationist and unaware while others in Europe knew what was really going on...maybe that's why it's at the top [of the panel] barely in view...
- Ashanti: Disney is glamorized, but a real mouse isn't like that- but he looks like he's reflecting on the Jewish experience as they were 'trapped' in World War II. He represents himself as a mouse because that's how the Jews were treated; they were considered insignificant.
- Jamal: Art is holding the baby mouse and Mickey Mouse is America, so maybe it's American Jews who came here after the Holocaust. It's the symbol like the Statue of Liberty of everyone gathering to come back to America.

This discussion highlights that, at some level, students understood that the panel acted as 'window' into the story. They were not, however, consistently attentive to the fact that framing provides a particular view into the story, and is therefore a deliberate and significant authorial decision. For example on the first page of *Persepolis* the author depicts a class portrait, but cuts herself just out of the frame. While reading, the class did

not pause to discuss the significance of this, and as a result, missed an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of both this concept and the text.

Like framing, students were only superficially aware of how the structure of the text, particularly the layout of the page, impacted the story. For example, when they read *Maus*, students did not notice how the wheel of Vladek's exercise bike is innovatively reconfigured as a frame (perhaps the only circular frame used in the entire book) to signal his trip down memory lane or the beginning of a 'story in a story' or the turning wheel of fortune. Similarly, students missed opportunities to explore how the structure of the actual text, particularly the chapter headings, shaped the narrative. This was most obvious in *Persepolis* where chapter headings are simple objects preceded by an article (e.g. 'The Letter' and 'The Bicycle'). Though students could have interpreted these textual features in numerous ways, they simply did not notice them or see their relevance within the broader narrative.

Unlike the other extradiegetic elements that students mostly missed, the issue of color was actively addressed while reading the graphic novels. Students were particularly opinionated as to why *Maus* and *Persepolis* did not make use of any color. While reading *Maus*, Jenna asserted that although colors would have helped her navigate the story better, she understood that "the black and white is to show that it's serious which the Holocaust obviously is." Latisha felt that including color would have made the story unbearable because to "see all that blood would be awful." In the case of *Maus*, students mostly thought that because the text dealt with a 'serious' subject there was no color or as Latisha put it "nothing to brighten it up or make it happy."

Though *Perspolis*, like *Maus* is a kind of memoir, students understood its lack of color in a very different way. Unlike in *Maus* where students felt that the color wasn't included because it would be too graphic; they believed the black and white theme in *Persepolis* was intended to make the character's experiences seem more truthful and objective:

- Ayala: She must have chosen black and white for a reason.
- Maria: I like black and white- there's no bluff, nothing is extra.
- Aubrey: Black and white is just straightforward. You can't make inferences that aren't there. You just know cut and dry what's there.
- Jamal: Like a newspaper.
- Aubrey: Right, like she telling you the facts about her story and life.

While students conceptualized the use of color in different ways, they did not fully recognize the authorial decision, the narrative weight within the use of color. In an article they read in class, Satrapi remarks:

I write a lot about the Middle East, so I write about violence. Violence today has become something so normal, so banal—that is to say everybody thinks it's normal. But it's not normal. To draw it and put it in color—the color of flesh and the red of blood, and so forth—reduced it by making it realistic (Hajdu, 2009, p. 302)

Though they read this article together and discussed the use of color in *Persepolis*, students for some reason misunderstood Satrapi's use of color as an indication of fact, as if she were somehow trying to depict an objective truth. As with other aspects of extradiegetic space, students never quite accessed this portal to meta-understanding and as a result, missed opportunities to explore some of the more interesting textual affordances of graphic narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights how students not only confronted their preconceived notions of comics as “easy,” “fun,” and “immature,” but how these early conceptions eventually gave way to a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of graphic narratives as complex, rich, and multi-layered. These findings indicate that while students’ conceptualization of graphic narratives “as easy” texts was consistently and thoroughly challenged, many of them—regardless of their academic profiles—struggled with the elements of text that differentiate graphic novels from traditional books. These findings challenge the seemingly widespread assumption in the field of literacy education that graphic novels are somehow easy texts to read (see Crawford, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2007; McTaggart, 2005). Furthermore, it suggests that educators who argue for the inclusion of graphic narratives as a tool to support struggling readers, (Crawford, 2004; McTaggart, 2005) may be ignoring some of the reading complexities and be unprepared to deal with the unique challenges of this type of text.

Additionally, students—both high and low performing—seemed to grasp some key textual differences of the graphic narratives quickly while others appeared to continuously frustrate or elude them entirely. For example, students eventually became adept at navigating the layout of the page, practicing closure, and decoding the pictorial and textual clues embedded within panels. Yet they continued to struggle or missed opportunities to explore some of the most unique features of this type of text. For example, they did not tap into how the layout of the panels impacts the narrative which many scholars argue is an important source of creativity and inventiveness in graphic narratives (see Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 2006). By not actively addressing these more unique textual features, students faced numerous obstacles while reading and

missed opportunities to enrich their understanding of the texts. These findings suggest that students may require text-specific strategies to access the unique textual features of the graphic novel.

Though this study undoubtedly supported the understanding that graphic novels are distinct texts (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 2006), this research also highlights some of the instructional challenges ELA instructors generally contend with regardless of text. In the classroom, many instructors struggle to engage students in the material and to get them to read beyond the surface of the narrative. Though these challenges are not exclusive to the graphic novel, they may diverge and manifest differently depending on the specific text at hand. For example, when working with a traditional print-based text, teachers may struggle to get their students to understand a reoccurring theme or symbolism by engaging in close readings of the text. In the graphic novel, addressing this same kind of challenge may involve getting students to include elements of extradiegetic space in their analysis and interpretation of the narrative. In this way, though the challenge is the same, the strategies to address it may vary depending on the material.

These findings point to various sources of tension that may have affected how students understood and interacted with the graphic narratives. Most importantly, students never seemed to have established a thorough understanding of how this type of text is constructed and read. Though they were assigned *Understanding Comics* for this specific purpose, many students consistently voiced their frustration and disinterest in the text; they complained that McCloud's work was too esoteric and they struggled to make sense of it. The supporting instruction seemed to do little to alleviate this frustration as

Sara used most of the class time to read portions of the text aloud and incorporated only a few activities designed to increase their capacity to make meaning from graphic narratives. Because students did not establish a solid foundational knowledge of how graphic narratives convey meaning, they were unsure of how to help themselves when they faced difficulties. Sara's homework sheets frequently asked students to describe what reading strategies they employed and many reported using a host of standard strategies for making meaning with traditional texts like making predictions, surveying the text, and activating schema. Despite their efforts, most students still struggled to understand what they read, even once they were able to navigate the layout of the page successfully.

Without the foundational knowledge and explicit strategies to deal with the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives, students also struggled to "be on the same page" and cope with divergent opinions among themselves and with their teacher. Because they never fully established a consistent vocabulary with which to describe what they were reading, they also struggled to discuss some of the material in class. For example, when reading *Maus* students reported having trouble following and discussing the timeline of the narrative, yet they spent little time in class exploring how sequence is utilized in the story or how to categorize and differentiate between the different temporal realities of past, present, and future.

These findings indicate that graphic narratives can be challenging to read and typically require a unique set of skills and strategies. The data also suggests that making meaning with this type of text is different from traditional print-based books and as a result necessitates different instruction than is typically provided in a traditional ELA

classroom. Such instruction would ideally familiarize readers with this format by offering them concrete strategies with which to navigate the layout of the page, practice closure, and decode the visual and verbal codes within the panels. This type of support would also guide readers in accessing the more elements of text such as those in the extradiegetic space, which not only establishes a meta-awareness of the material, but shapes the narrative as well. In addressing the particular narrative constructions of graphic narratives, such instruction would ultimately help readers establish a vocabulary with which to describe and discuss what they had read. In the next chapter, I will highlight specific instructional strategies that Sara deployed and explore how they impacted students' opportunities for making meaning with the graphic narratives.

CHAPTER 5: “I JUST THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SOMETHING FUN...[BUT] I DON’T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THEM”: HOW INSTRUCTION SHAPES STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDINGS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

The previous chapter described how Sara’s class grappled with the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives. In this chapter, I will draw on field observations, interview transcripts, and class work as well as students’ own reports to look at how instruction shaped learning. Specifically, I will discuss how a traditional ELA instructional approach seemed to limit opportunities for students’ making meaning within the graphic narratives while a multiliteracies pedagogy seemed to provide more expansive ways of studying graphic narratives. I will conclude this chapter by discussing why a nontraditional instructional approach seems better suited for nontraditional texts such as graphic narratives and could potentially be used to expand students’ general understanding of text, reading, and ELA learning.

Traditional ELA Approach: Limiting Opportunities for Making Meaning in Graphic Novels

Though this study was initially conceptualized through a multiliteracies lens, Sara generally taught graphic narratives using a traditional ELA approach. Her pedagogy was traditional in the sense that she did not seem to view graphic narratives as being a distinct kind of text that requires unique instructional strategies. Sara considered them a tool through which to build basic literacy skills such as reading, writing, and vocabulary for traditional texts. Her primary instructional goal for using graphic novels was not to introduce her students to multimodal literacies, but to get them generally excited about reading:

I thought it would be a way of engaging [students and also to help them] realize that reading is not just the Shakespeare that we read every year...and it’s not just the same from the literary cannon that

everyone is used to, but now they can understand [reading] in a different way [because] reading doesn't have to be boring because I feel like sometimes students aren't motivated to read....I just thought it would be something fun. There's not really much more of a basis other than I thought it would be exciting to teach graphic novels because I was so excited by them.

In addition to using graphic narratives to teach basic literacy skills, Sara thought that including texts not typically used in the classroom would broaden her students' understanding of literature:

Aside from graphic novels being engaging, I wanted them to see that we can learn about historical events through texts that some people perceive as "unacademic"...I really love the narrative standpoint of many of the novels; the memoir style of *Persepolis* is my favorite [and] I enjoy Art telling his father's story through *Maus* as well.

Though Sara recognized that graphic narratives are not mainstream, canonical literature, she did not see them as requiring new ways of reading and thinking about text. Due to this, she did not necessarily see a need to explore the graphic narratives using non-traditional instructional strategies and generally stuck with a traditional ELA approach. However, this presented challenges for both Sara and her students and ultimately limited opportunities for learning graphic novels.

Instructional Challenges within the Traditional ELA Approach

While studying the graphic novels, Sara struggled not only to engage her students, but also to find the right instructional tools with which to support their learning. In presenting these findings, my objective is not to point to whatever shortcomings Sara, like all teachers, may have. Rather, the point is that working with graphic narratives would challenge any teacher who used traditional ELA instruction because of their distinct textual qualities. In Sara's class, instruction was also initially obstructed by

unmotivated students who resisted reading the graphic novels. These difficulties ultimately impacted how students interacted with the texts.

Because Sara's preferred instructional method is to facilitate class-wide discussion of texts, she relied heavily on both student interest and participation. When I observed her in other classes (not related to this study), this approach seemed to work well, and students were generally responsive and maintained a meaningful discussion without much prompting. In this particular course, however, Sara struggled to start and maintain class-wide dialogue because many of her students did not initially respond well to the texts and several actively resisted them. This lack of engagement and resistant attitude affected the quality of the discussions and ultimately threw Sara—instruction-wise—off her game. Because her assignments were all fairly traditional in the sense that they relied mostly on reading, responding to questions, and essay writing, Sara felt the discussions made her class “a fun and exciting place to be,” and without them, she feared the course would be “kind of dry and even boring.”

Sara believed that the reason her students initially responded so poorly to the graphic novels was because the course had not been advertised correctly. In the previous year, when the comics component was explicitly promoted, students were enthusiastic about the class. Sara reported that they had engaged in “much more lively conversations [and] wanted to keep going with [it] and see more.” Teaching a room full of comics aficionados and fans suited Sara's instructional style. Her classes had been packed with intrinsically motivated learners who were ready to tackle the material through dynamic discussion and heated debate. According to Sara, these students were engaged because they “knew what they were getting into” and signed up with the express purpose of

working with these kinds of text. In contrast, this year the course had not been advertised correctly and, based on the title alone ('Creative Writing: Genre Studies'), students signed up thinking they were enrolled in an intense creative writing class. Sara felt that this was incredibly misleading and deeply affected how students responded to the coursework. She also felt that this was why there was an overrepresentation of females enrolled this year (5:1) who, in her opinion, tend to like writing and be less enthusiastic about comics than boys. Working with a class of creative writers, Sara found herself struggling to engage her students in reading comics. In an email, she describes this as her greatest instructional hurdle of the year:

The biggest struggle I faced came from the expectations of the course. Because the course is titled, "Creative Writing: Genre Studies," students expected that the course would include a heavier creative writing component, which is something that I am struggling with logistically with the course as a whole. With regard to the graphic novels, the biggest struggle was getting the "buy-in" from these students.

Sara believes that her instructional style is best suited for students who are intrinsically motivated to learn. Faced with a classroom full of students who were largely uninterested in graphic narratives, she struggled to adapt and engage them in learning.

According to Sara, her students were less inclined to study graphic narratives because they "had expected to do creative writing all year." Though she infused her course with interesting creative writing assignments, Sara found it difficult to unify the different literacy components of her course. Because she believed that there is "not much in common between creative writing and graphic novels," her lessons evolved into parallel curricula in which the first fifteen minutes were devoted to a creative writing exercise that was unrelated to the reading they did, while the remaining time was used to

study the graphic narratives. In one of our interviews, I suggested that the creative writing be used as an opportunity to explore how graphic texts depict common literary themes and narrative elements (e.g. space, time, and character), as an opportunity for students to experiment and play with these structures. Though Sara was interested in trying to unite these disparate parts of her curriculum, she ultimately decided to keep the creative writing component separate from the reading. By doing so, the graphic narratives were primarily used to build basic reading skills and academic writing, which seemed to limit opportunities for student learning of graphic narratives.

Learning Challenges within the Traditional ELA Approach

Each graphic novel was typically introduced to the class via a brief presentation or a slideshow presented by Sara. Students then read the text on their own or aloud together in class. For homework they were usually assigned either to answer reading comprehension questions or given a brief writing assignment. Class time was mostly reserved for discussion, analysis, or an occasional group activity. When her students had trouble understanding the texts, Sara, like all good English teachers, prompted them to utilize traditional comprehension strategies like making predictions, skimming the text, or activating prior knowledge. Students struggled with certain elements of the graphic narratives because they were being guided through the texts using traditional ELA instructional strategies.

Scaffolding reading comprehension. When students initially struggled with the graphic narratives, Sara repeatedly reminded them to employ reading comprehension strategies like previewing the text and self-questioning. It seemed that all the students were very familiar with these techniques and knew how to use them correctly. Though

these strategies were generally helpful, they were not enough; they did not sufficiently assist learners in navigating through the unique textual affordances of the graphic narratives. In a response paper on *The 9/11 Report*, students were asked to describe what reading strategies they used to help them understand the text. One student, Jamal noted:

When reading this graphic novel I used a number of reading strategies. One of them is [previewing,] reading the pictures before I read the words that way I will have a little insight when it comes to understanding what I am reading... I didn't enjoy how the structure of reading the graphic novel would confuse me. Sometimes the way you have to read from one page to the other page changes and some parts have to be read before other parts... I still don't get [how to read] those parts.

This quote illustrates that although Jamal employed a traditional comprehension strategy, previewing the text, he still struggled with comprehending the material. This strategy is not well-suited for graphic narratives since, as discussed in the previous chapters, images and words work in tandem and cannot be read separately. Like Jamal, Michael also considered the pictures to be illustrative rather than narrative, a mode to be read, skimmed, or previewed prior to reading the words:

One of the reading strategies I used when reading graphic novels by myself is using prior knowledge and I look at the pictures on the page before I start reading to get an idea of which box I should read next... When I look at the pictures before I read I can make predictions and see if my predictions are correct which I like to do.

Though Michael used two traditional ELA strategies, activating prior knowledge and making predictions, this approach ultimately fell short because it was not adapted for working with graphic narratives. Recognizing this issue, Michael later noted that even though he used several comprehension strategies, he was still struggling to navigate the text correctly. Unsure how to do things differently, Michael concluded that the only way to read the graphic novel successfully is by “reading comics a lot [so that then you could

learn to] read every page correctly.” Like Michael, Ashanti recognized that traditional comprehension strategies alone did not fully support her learning. Because she tends to “read words before pictures because that’s what [her] eyes are usually drawn to,” Ashanti realized that she was “comparing the words to the pictures instead of connecting them.” In a response paper, she describes that when working with graphic novels, the reader must connect words and images because “both [are] trying to express the same sentiment.” In this way, Ashanti emphasized the importance of treating the graphic text holistically, multimodally, which traditional comprehension strategies are not necessarily intended to do. Jamal, Michael, and Ashanti demonstrate that traditional comprehension strategies, those that they were encouraged to use in this class, can be either incompatible or need to be adapted to accommodate the unique textual affordances of graphic novels.

Reading the text. In addition to struggling to apply traditional comprehension strategies to graphic narratives, students also experienced difficulty reading the texts using the methods Sara selected. At first, the class mostly read the texts aloud together. In an interview Sara explained that she preferred this approach for two reasons. First, she did it because she felt that students did not always complete their reading at home, and second, because the material would be fresh in their minds, which may help them engage more in the discussion. However, reading aloud seemed to set too quick a reading pace; students frequently complained that they could not read along comfortably. More specifically, they reported being unable to read both the words and the images and often chose to read one or the other. In her response paper Keisha wrote, “Sometimes when we’re reading and I only look at the pictures, I got really confused because it didn’t make any sense.” Similarly, Samah struggled to decide which mode to read:

I prefer to read the images because a picture can tell a thousand words. [In contrast,] when reading [just] the text it was difficult to imagine what was happening...then again, when reading [just] the pictures it's [also] hard to get all the [story's] details.

Though Samah and her classmates eventually learned to read both text and images, reading aloud hindered them from doing so because it did not give them adequate time or support to decode and negotiate both modes.

Reading aloud also seemed to send contradictory messages about how such texts should be read. For example, on the third day of *The 9/11 Report*, Sara remarked that “this is not going to read quickly; there’s no rush. Graphic novels aren’t like prose; you have to read them thoroughly and slowly, taking in each detail... [it can take] 20 minutes to read two pages.” And yet, in the same class, they read aloud about ten pages together. Additionally, because the class read only the print aloud, this method subtly deemphasized the importance of the images and did not model multimodal reading. This cast the graphic novel as a ‘print’ book, a literary text with cool accompanying pictures that were neither discussed nor considered to be especially important. The graphic novels that were read as part of the course, though multimodal texts, were not taught as such; instead they were mostly studied through a linguistic mode and traditional literary lens. These frames seemed to shape subtle instructional decisions, influencing the class’ initial understanding of these texts and impacting the way students regarded them. For example Jenna wrote, “When it comes to *The 9/11 Report*, I rather read the words because the pictures only show snippets of what’s happening... I read the captions and then glance at the pictures.” In this way, Jenna, following instructional cues, prioritized print and did not initially read the pictures or grasp their role within the text. Reading of graphic

narratives as if they are traditional literary texts and ignoring their multimodality detracted from their educational potential and limited opportunities for student learning.

After several complaints from students that they either could not keep up or did not like reading aloud in class, Sara decided to have her students do most of their reading at home.

Maus was the first book students read almost entirely independently; each night they read a couple of chapters and completed five or six comprehension questions. I assisted Sara in writing the homework questions, and we ensured that they were not only thought-provoking, but drew on the visual elements of the text. These nightly questions also included an in-class discussion topic for which students could preview and prepare for the next day's in-class conversation or activity. To spark discussion, these starters aimed to be controversial, topical, and relatable. For example, one discussion topic from *Maus* was:

Think about your own identity. Is it something constant or changing? Do we “don different masks” at different times and if so, why? Why would someone choose to be something they're not? Have you ever “acted white” or “acted black” or “acted rich” or “acted poor”? Why? How do you stay “true to yourself”?

The next day, this prompt garnered an intensely personal response:

- | | |
|----------|--|
| Samah: | I am Arabic and people sometimes will ask me questions like “Why aren’t you wearing a veil?” It just shows how ignorant people are and how they perceive a race to be from the stuff they see on TV. |
| Ayala: | People think that deaf people are dumb, but I prove them wrong. |
| Ashanti: | People always say I’m a white girl in a black girl’s body. I’m not that; I’m just a black girl. I don’t act white, I <i>act</i> like myself. You can’t act white, or |

black, or Asian. You can't even act; you should only be yourself.

Jenna: People think all white people are rich, but my family isn't. We are not totally destitute or poor, but aren't the definition of rich either...like my parents really have to work for everything...we don't have an over the top house, or cars, or me getting everything I want.

Stephanie: As a cheerleader, people are always thinking I'm stuck up and stupid. Typically, they think I'm just a ditz and weak because no one really thinks of cheerleading as a sport.

Despite this kind of rich conversation, one-third of the class was not completing the work or participating in the discussions. Some students had simply not been won over; they wanted the class to be used exclusively for creative writing. Others were becoming increasingly more interested, but struggled with the texts, requiring additional scaffolding and support. For these students it seemed that the move from reading aloud together in class to reading entirely at home had been too abrupt and had left them feeling even more frustrated with the text. In response, Sara struggled to accommodate her instruction to best meet the needs of these different kinds of learners.

To maximize student learning, Sara had the class begin reading the texts independently or with a partner in-class. Though she instituted this new approach in time for only a few remaining classes before they completed the last graphic novel they read, it was by far the most favored reading method among the students. In an interview Keisha explained why:

I actually liked it most when we read in class silently because if we did have a problem we could just call Ms. K. We'd all just sit quietly and we read for 40 minutes and it was like the quietest room and it was silence and calm to read and if we also had a

question we could call someone or tell a friend and they could help us interpret it.

This method seemed to be most effective because it gave students the opportunity not only to work with the text at their own pace, but also to consult with Sara or their friends for additional help. It also seemed to encourage them to engage more with the material. For example, one morning while reading *Persepolis* using this method, I observed Stephanie and Jenna heatedly debating the importance of a character's expression and discussing how it impacted the narrative. Using this approach seemed to give students the opportunity to read the text at a comfortable pace while also offering them the chance to seek additional support or alternative interpretations.

Additionally, reading independently in a group setting seemed especially well-suited for working with graphic narratives. In an interview, Maria reported that although she reads manga "while lazying on [her] bed at home listening to music," she typically discusses what she has read with her friends the next day in school. Similarly, this reading method seemed to offer students the opportunity to unravel the text at their own pace while also providing them with a supportive learning community. In these last few classes when the students read to themselves, I frequently observed students consulting with one another for clarification or help. Some students read the entire period, but most read in shorter intervals, stopping to talk to one another at the end of each chapter. Like the others, I observed Maria read a chapter of *Persepolis* and then, when Ashanti had also completed the chapter, they discussed its major points, themes, and addressed any questions they had about it. On one occasion, they consulted with Sara for additional help. Reading the graphic novel in this way perhaps encouraged students (as Weinstein suggests in her research) to foster a sense of pleasure. *Persepolis*, which was the only text

read using this method, was by far the class' favorite. While there is no way to know for sure that the way in which they made their way through the text was what increased their level of enjoyment, it certainly seemed to contribute.

Building background knowledge. Sara's preferred method of providing background knowledge was through a brief Prezi (similar to a PowerPoint presentation) on the smart board. In a series of text-heavy slides she would outline the key historical events along with the background of the author and the major characters of the book. Perhaps because she blended the historical and literary information, students had trouble discerning historical facts from creative license and interpretation. (Many graphic novels, including the ones used in this course, defy strict classification because they tend to blend multiple genres.) For example, students periodically had difficulty relating World War II as it is depicted in *Maus* to the actual events of the Holocaust because they seemed to lack adequate historical background to discern the difference.

Though most of the graphic novels Sara selected for her course were historical, she did not identify herself as a "history person" or see herself as a teacher of history. In a brief talk after the *Persepolis* Prezi, Sara shared with me that she does not believe that as an English teacher she should be expected to teach social studies. She also expressed anxiety over the new standards which will require ELA teachers to incorporate historical texts in their curriculum. Though she did not see it this way, by including these particular graphic novels in her course, Sara was effectively addressing history through literature and had the opportunity to draw on these new standards within her instruction. However, because she did not consider herself a teacher of history, she spent little time developing this background knowledge, and as a result, missed this learning opportunity. Without

sufficient historical information to scaffold their reading, the class ultimately struggled to consider history within an ELA context, which in turn affected how they read the texts and learned the material.

Unlike the other texts students read in the course (such as Shakespeare), the historicity of the graphic novels seemed to, at times, obstruct learning. This could be because students were unfamiliar with the historical events depicted in the texts or because they were not accustomed to assimilating historical knowledge with literature. In some cases, like at the start of *The 9/11 Report*, historical knowledge was assumed because, as one student put it, “We were alive during this time.” Yet, while reading the text most students found it difficult to keep track of the different government agencies and the international web of CIA and Al Qaeda operatives. Reflecting on their lack of historical knowledge, Latisha declared, “The only pictures I knew of 9/11 were towers burning. I didn’t really have a clear look of what else was going on that day.” In another example, while reading *Maus*, they struggled to understand the significance of Vladek being framed by a large Jewish star and how wearing stars affected both the Jewish characters in the book and the victims of the Holocaust:

Devonte: I noticed that all the characters are wearing stars now.

Stephanie: Yeah, all the Jewish characters, you mean.

Jenna: Yeah, I don’t get this thing with the stars. I mean I know it’s a Jewish symbol or something... I don’t get why they had to wear it or why it’s here now [framing the panel]. I mean what happened if they changed their clothes?

Devonte: Yeah, why sew it? You wouldn’t be able to get it off your clothes.

Without a solid historical background, the class missed important learning opportunities, which in turn affected how they read and studied the material.

While students may have been somewhat familiar with the events of September 11th and World War II, they had nearly no background knowledge of the events depicted in *Persepolis*. In a brief Prezi, Sara provided some general background on Iran and the Islamic revolution during which she reiterated that she is “not a fan of history.” Instead of “getting lost in the historical details,” she urged the class to see the book “as a story of someone growing up in an interesting place during an interesting time.” In this way, the historicity of the text was deemphasized and seen as adding extra flavor to an already well-seasoned story. Following this, Sara had her class research five interesting facts about the Iranian Revolution, telling them to google the information, but “to make sure it’s a good source.” Without proper historical background and instructional guidance, the class struggled to learn this information; one student returned the next day with facts on the Industrial Revolution.

A Multiliteracies Approach: Expanding Opportunities for Making Meaning in Graphic Novels

Unlike a traditional ELA method which emphasizes basic literacy skills through a language-based approach, a multiliteracies pedagogy speaks to both the multimodality and pluralistic nature of graphic narratives. While a traditional approach limits the opportunities for making meaning within graphic novels, a multiliteracies pedagogy is expansive because it addresses the “multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning-making... [and] focuses on the realities of increasing...linguistic differences” (The New London Group, 1996, para. 12, 13). Though the class studied graphic novels in

mostly traditional ways, they did at times draw on some of the theoretical principles established by multiliteracies. When a traditional instructional approach was used, opportunities for making meaning seemed to be curtailed and largely limited. In contrast, addressing the graphic novels through a multiliteracies approach, seemed to not only expand opportunities for learning graphic novels, but also encourage a richer, deeper, and more nuanced kind of understanding of these texts.

In Sara's class, instruction was frequently adaptive and centered on students' practical needs. For example, though they never heard the term 'situated practice,' the class learned how to write a resume and fill-out a college application. In this way, Sara's pedagogy was firmly grounded in pragmatism as she sought, in her own words, to "prepare [her students] for the future, whether that be college or career." While working to meet standards in a practical way, Sara's class also challenged, to a degree, the traditional power structures of school. Students were given a voice within the classroom and frequently provided with opportunities to be "in charge of their own learning." For example, Sara periodically invited students' suggestions and feedback with the expressed aim of improving her course. In an email, she elaborated on this point:

I asked the students to complete a mid-year teacher evaluation. This is not required by the district, but it is something that I like to use to perfect my teaching. I believe that students should be aware of their own learning and find out what methods work for them and what doesn't work for them.

Sara wrote that her ideal classroom is one "full of discussion elicited by the students where [they] work in small groups and really grapple with the material in ways that they find pertinent to their own lives." In promoting this kind of student-driven instruction, Sara made efforts to nurture a learning community by casting her students as stakeholders

in the course. This is demonstrated not only by her midpoint survey, but in her enabling comments like, “This is your class. What do you want to learn?” Furthermore, Sara often downplayed her own authority and situated herself as a co-learner, aligning herself with her students and their journey by authentically expressing her own enthusiasm or confusion, especially while working with the graphic narratives.

In the next section I highlight instances where instruction accessed a multiliteracies approach. I look at how the four dimensions of a multiliteracies pedagogy—situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice—seemed to expand opportunities for learning and impact students’ understanding of graphic narratives, multimodal reading, and ELA learning. Wherever the class did not fully explore one of the dimensions of the multiliteracies pedagogy, I describe why that opportunity was limited or underutilized. Before presenting this data, it is important to note that The New London Group (2000) asserts that:

the four components of [multiliteracies] pedagogy do not constitute a linear hierarchy, nor do they represent stages. Rather, they are components that are related in complex ways. Elements of each may occur simultaneously, while at different times one or the other will predominate, and all of them are repeatedly revisited at different levels. (p. 32)

Though the four dimensions of the multiliteracies pedagogy are non-linear, I have opted to present them here sequentially in order to better organize my findings.

Making Connections through Situated Practice

Situated practice is identified as “immersion in meaningful practices within a community of learners who are capable of playing multiple and different roles based on their backgrounds and experiences” (2000, p. 33). As discussed in the literature review, this involves using personal experiences to introduce learners to new concepts. While

working with graphic narratives, students periodically did this and contextualized what they were reading within their own experiences. Sometimes this occurred effortlessly, other times it required some facilitation and coaxing. On one occasion Sara reported that she enjoyed a character's idiosyncratic accent, prompting her students to consider how they felt about different ways of speaking:

Aubrey: Whenever I go on vacation everyone knows I'm from Jersey.

Sara: So what's the inference there?

Aubrey: That everyone from Jersey is trashy...but if you have a British accent you sound smart no matter what you say.

Maria: That's so true. At the store where I work, I love hearing British tourists speak because they just sound so smart. I want to listen to them even when they ask for a croissant; they sound so brilliant saying anything.

Samah: It's a stereotype that it's playing into.

Maria: Also a lot of famous people are British.

Sara: What about two British people talking to each other? Do you think they sound smart to one another?

Ashanti: Well if you speak cockney than you're considered lower class in Britain. When I think of accents in general, I think of Irish and French being much friendlier and softer than German and Polish.

Sara: That's so interesting. Do you all associate French accents like that?

Maria: I think of 'happy,' but also 'stuck-up.'

Sara: So now we're getting into that stereotype. Is Collette on [the television show] *Pan Am* stuck up?

Samah: No, she's the nicest, but also a real flirt.

This discussion highlights how the class situated what they were learning within the context of their own lives. By doing so, students had the opportunity to explore the way they personally stereotype and privilege different ways speaking.

At times, students struggled to assimilate what they read with their personal experiences. For example while reading *Understanding Comics*, students questioned how comics were similar to film. Though they drew on their own experiences with and knowledge of film, they had trouble pinpointing the similarities and differences. On other occasions, opportunities to situate practice were lost because the information was considered too controversial or contentious for the classroom. For example while reading *Maus*, Aubrey questioned why the Poles were depicted as pigs; Jenna suggested that it may be because those characters function as Nazi enforcers or police. This comment sparked a heated debate on whether law enforcement officials are in fact, 'pigs.' As students began sharing their personal experiences and stories, Sara redirected the conversation by saying, "I didn't want to bring up that connection... it's very controversial."

Developing a Metalanguage through Overt Instruction

The second dimension in the multiliteracies pedagogy is overt instruction, which is the "introduction of explicit metalanguages with which to describe, interpret, [and deconstruct] the design elements of different modes of meaning" (The New London Group, 2000, p. 246). This involves giving depth to learning by asking analytical questions about the representational, social, and organizational elements of meaning-making. In describing overt instruction within a multiliteracies approach, Kalantzis and

Cope (2000) offer an example of a group of students comparing the visual representation of animals in science textbooks to “the ways in which these animals are represented in New Guinean and Torres Strait Islander art” (p. 243). By examining “the links between traditional story...and the artistic images, [the students] develop a metalanguage to describe meaning that meshes both of these with the core concepts of the art syllabus [while] develop[ing] a multidisciplinary [and] multimodal approach to meaning” (p. 243-4). In this way, overt instruction is not “direct transmission, drills, or rote memorization [instead, it is an opportunity for learners to be scaffolded] by a group of experts who help organize and guide practice [by] building on and recruiting what the learner already knows and has accomplished” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 33).

Overt instruction provides students with a metalanguage which gives them a blueprint to deconstruct their experiences and integrate new information. Comics are well-suited for this approach because they use different semiotic systems in established ways to create meaning, giving readers the opportunity to explore how these different modes interact with and “hang together” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p. 246). Though *Understanding Comics* was intended to introduce students to the metalanguage of comics, it was not explicitly presented to them in this way. As a result, they missed an important opportunity to attain “conscious awareness and control over what they learned” (New London Group, 2000, p. 33).

While students may not have acquired the metalanguage of comics by reading *Understanding Comics*, Sara used several activities that gave them a better understanding of the format that may not have occurred had she not used these overt instructional strategies. In one activity, Sara asked her students to pick any sequence of panels in

Understanding Comics and interpret the pictures by providing accompanying text.

Marisol chose a panel in which the McCloud-character is demonstrating movement. In her explanation of the caption she shared, “He’s moving so fast that he’s knocking people over... I can read the lines and sense the drama here.” Eventually, students became more adept at describing and interpreting the different semiotic elements and interactions within the texts.

In another activity, students explored how panels frame characters’ perspectives and experiences. After listening to a read-aloud of *The Arrival*, a wordless graphic narrative, they studied the impact of framing by looking at different images by the photographer Dorothea Lange. Students described how the “Migrant Mother” affected them differently when she was shown alone or in the presence of children. Afterwards, they were given different-sized cardboard frames and told to tell a story by framing a scene or an object. As they completed their projects, students reflected that “a little picture can show so many different things” and that a “picture is more than just a picture; it tells a story.” For homework, they created their own photo journal essays which drew on a variety of subjects ranging from the Occupy Wall Street movement to local traffic. These instances of overt instruction seemed to expand student learning by helping them acquire a basic metalanguage of comics.

Denaturalizing Learning through Critical Framing

The third dimension in the multiliteracies pedagogy is critical framing, which is “interpreting the social and cultural contexts of particular designs of meaning” (The New London Group, 2000, p. 247). This involves students “standing back from what they are studying and viewing it critically in relation to its context” (p. 247). In this way, critical

framing is all about recasting the familiar as unfamiliar by gaining “the necessary personal and theoretical distance from what [has been] learned...and viewing it critically in relation to its context” (New London Group, 2000, p. 34-5). In a traditional ELA classroom, texts are typically analyzed for their key ideas, historical or literary significance, and overall craft or structure (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012). In contrast, a multiliteracies approach, critically frames text “in relation to the historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centered relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice...[in order to] denaturalize and make strange again what they have learned and mastered” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 86). In this way, a multiliteracies approach seeks to use text as a lens through which to examine and address broader issues.

Though the class did not critically frame their learning using an organized or consistent approach, they did occasionally analyze what they read in critical ways. This was perhaps best demonstrated while they read *Persepolis*, particularly in their analysis of Marji’s childhood experiences during the Iranian Revolution. While analyzing how Marji becomes aware of the civil instability around her, Aubrey reported:

It reminds me of us with 9/11. We were in the third grade, and when I went home my mom told me what happened, because that was when everything was falling...I feel like when things are happening that are dangerous and serious, the whole parent-child boundary is put aside and breaks down.

Though this comment positioned the reading in a way that the entire class could relate, Sara did not seize this opportunity to engage in a discussion which could have potentially critically framed both the class’ reading of *Persepolis* and their own experiences of September 11th.

Similarly, when students read how Marji's father prevented a neighbor from dating their maid because she was of a different social class, students initially expressed outrage and shock. In the lively conversation that ensued, Latisha mentioned how social norms are changing and brought up the recent marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton. Again, this would have been an opportune time to engage in an authentic discussion which could have critically framed how social class impacts everyday realities, a topic that is especially pertinent in MHS, where students are very class conscious and are identified by what side of town they live in.

These episodes demonstrate that although students had the ability to do so, they did not critically frame their learning as described by a multiliteracies pedagogy. By ignoring the broader social contexts of their learning, the class did not fully actualize this instructional dimension. As a result, though discussions about the graphic novels they read brought up topics and ideas that could have been employed for this expressed purpose, students' analysis of their learning was generally limited and shortsighted.

Revisiting Learning to Transform Practice

The fourth dimension of a multiliteracies pedagogy is transformed practice which is "transferr[ing] meanings and putting these to work in other contexts or cultural sites" (Kalantzis & Cope, 2000, p. 248). This involves not only making connections across different areas of learning, but the literal transformation of the student whose learning has caused him or her to see or do things in a new way. The New London Group (2000) argues, "We need always to return to where it began, to situated practice, [which is] now a re-practice, where theory becomes a reflective practice" (p. 35). One way of doing this, suggested by The New London Group (1996), "is to recreate a discourse by engaging in it

for our own real purposes” (p. 87). For example, having students act like professional biologists while also “resisting the depiction of female things—from eggs to organisms—as ‘passive’” (p. 87). In this way, students act as both biologists and feminists, “two different discourses, or social identities, or ‘interests’ that have historically been at odds” (The New London Group, p. 87). By situating what has been learned (feminist perspectives) back into its original context (biology class), students transform their practice. Although Sara did not fully engage in a multiliteracies pedagogy, the data did show evidence of transformed practice, in the sense that students did “apply and revise what they [had] learned” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 87). This became particularly clear during our last group interview during which students shared their own self-reports and discussed how the class had transformed their understanding of graphic narratives, multimodal reading, and learning within the ELA classroom.

Almost all of the students reported their understanding of graphic novels had shifted dramatically over the course of the study. Most students initially believed that graphic narratives were simply long comic books; juvenile texts that were easier to read because they had pictures. By the conclusion of the study, most of them, like Aubrey, had rejected this original opinion:

Before we got into graphic novels I was very biased and ... [felt] like you only read a book and books are just words and that's it. I never thought I could get into something that's a comic book and not just looking at the pictures and being like “Oh, this is a superhero” and reading it for fun...[the graphic novels we read in class] we're actually much more serious and interesting than I thought.

Like Aubrey, Latisha also overcame her early misconceptions of graphic novels and recognized that “graphic novels are cartoons, but not just for kids.” Similarly, Marisol reported:

[Before this study,] I didn’t read graphic novels at home, so for me it was really stepping out of my boundaries. [In the end] I actually liked stepping out of my boundaries because we’re so used to reading just text... [In the] beginning, reading graphic novels was kind of uncomfortable for me because I was like “why am I reading this?” I always used to think that comic books are for kids and about superheroes and that the world was always going to be perfect at the end of the book. This class has really opened my eyes...now I think that graphic novels are a little bit better even than regular print texts. It really got me thinking about books in a new way...

With this more sophisticated understanding of graphic novels, the class also stopped grouping all comics texts in an oversimplified or vague literary category; instead, they recognized, as Michael did, that there “are as many different kinds of comic books [as there are] novels.”

By the end of the study, most students also seemed to understand that the presence of pictures in a text does not make it inherently “babyish;” instead, these elements can be narratively rich and even be a source of engagement as Brianna described:

If [*Maus*] didn’t have pictures of anything, we probably wouldn’t have thought of the book in a different way, as harsher, as mice getting treated like the bottom of the food chain, but like people. The pictures really changed the book for me... [without them] we probably would have put the book down to be honest.

Though students had originally conceived of graphic novels as “adult picture books”; their experiences with these texts transformed this opinion. Several students, like

Stephanie and Devonte, described that graphic novel in fact did take them back to their childhoods, but not in the infantile way they initially thought it would:

Stephanie: I think graphic novels are actually more attractive because now that we're all growing up we don't really have childhood thoughts anymore or an imagination...so it kind of forces us to have an imagination...

Devonte: Yeah...when a child has an imagination there's no filter on it...their imagination is endless. Then when you grow older it deteriorates to reality which is something I'm pretty sure none of us want to go through, reality, because it's not like the best thing. So I feel like when we're subjected to read [the graphic novels] and do things that kind of bring you back to your childhood...you get this like natural urge to have fun [with it].

These positive experiences not only shifted the class' general opinion of graphic novels, but prompted them to wonder why such texts are not used more regularly in school:

Samah: I wish that they let us read these kinds of books earlier.

Hindi: What do you mean by earlier?

Samah: Like when we were younger and smaller...in younger grades.

Hindi: Why?

Samah: Because now we're seniors and we're going to leave...our reading time is pretty much over and [the graphic novel] was really fun to read, different from other kinds of books...and [in the end] I really liked it...I even didn't mind reading this when Ms. K. gave it to us for homework.

Hindi: So why do you think it would be great if they gave you these types of text to read at a younger age?

Samah: Yeah, if people had different experiences with different kinds of books, maybe they'd be less bias and close-minded to reading.

The course not only transformed how students understood graphic narratives as a type of text, but also seemed to impact how students understood multimodal reading. For most of the students in the class, this type of reading was an eye-opening experience and their attitudes toward it changed dramatically over time. Generally these perceptions moved from “easy” to “frustrating” to “engaging.” In her self-reports, Latisha reflected on how her own understanding of multimodal reading had steadily shifted:

When we first started, I thought reading comics was really tough. No wait, before we even started I thought reading comics was really easy. Then, we started reading and I thought, oh my god, this is really hard. Now I realize that graphic novels make you step out of your comfort zone [because] you're balancing how to read words and pictures at the same time—following the content properly—reading from left to right, not just reading completely down in one way. Sometimes it's down, then it's back up, and then it's left to right...It makes your mind really have to work...[but] you do get used to it after a while.

Similarly, Jenna and Keisha elaborated on how they ultimately found multimodal reading to be an even more engaging reading experience than traditional print-based reading:

Jenna: When you read [a regular book] sometimes when you're reading you're not really reading what you're reading...like when you're reading and thinking 'hey, what am I going to do this weekend?' and kind of spacing. But, when you're reading graphic novels, you really have to pay attention to what you're doing 'cause you know if you're ...missing stuff and then you look and you're like 'what's going on?' because you're reading the wrong panel... or missing an important picture. So, I feel like when you read graphic novels you actually have to pay a lot of attention when you're doing it.

Keisha: Yeah, when you read comics you have to read the pictures, read the words, read both...and keep track

of where to read next... [it] keeps your more on top of the game.”

At the start of this study, many students reported reading either the words or the pictures, and struggled to read the graphic narratives multimodally. Many did not initially recognize the narrative importance of the pictures and instead prioritized print. By the conclusion of this study, most students were aware that reading comics successfully entailed reading both of these modalities, as Latisha explained,

Reading comics gives you a much deeper reading because ... there's much more to elaborate on like: “Why do you think she put this picture in?” and “Why do you think she put this picture in black and white?” or “What do you think she put it in this color?” and “Why do you think she put that as a symbol to represent that concept?” It's like there's a lot more questions and things to analyze.

Over time, students' perceptions of multimodal reading transformed as they recognized that such reading requires the incorporation of multiple modes of meaning which can challenge and even engage the reader.

In addition to transforming perceptions of graphic narratives and multimodal reading, this course also shaped students' understanding of the nature of learning within the ELA classroom. Specifically, including nonfiction historical graphic novels in the curriculum altered students' understanding of the kind of content typically covered in ELA. These texts, like *The 9/11 Report*, *Maus*, and *Persepolis*, integrated literature and history, and in doing so challenged some of the assumptions students had about ELA learning, as Maria noted,

I liked that it gave a broader perspective on what was happening during these events like the Holocaust. You [usually] get one perspective, either like a history book's perspective in school, [or] a survivor's perspective from a literary book [like *Night*] in English class. *Maus* gave me a totally different point-of-view.

Students were also described how their experiences reading such texts in ELA compared to the type of learning they did in social studies class:

Brianna: I felt like I learned history first-hand like through someone who lived through it, through someone who was drawing it out for me. When I think of history it's like black and white, the same old thing... --The typical thing that would happen in that time period. But when [Marji] drew it out for me, I didn't think about it as our history mashed up together as we learn in world history 1 or 2.... I learned it as an event, like she walked us through it, the pain, the suffering, honest pain and suffering.

Jenna: When I learned about the Holocaust in world history, I always felt that they showed us pictures of people dying and that's just what it is. Like I understood that, but this gave me more depth to it rather than just the facts. It gave us a timeline and what someone went through under Hitler and the Nazis.

To Brianna and Jenna, the lead characters in both *Persepolis* and *Maus* seemed real, relatable, and not only drew them into their stories, but into their historical worlds.

Similarly, Ashanti not only preferred learning about history through literature, but preferred the method of delivery and instruction:

OK, so, if you guys had never assigned me to read a comic book, I probably never would have read it in my life. So that's a good connection [as to] why these book should be in school. I don't like history. I hate history. I think history is boring. 'Cause all they do is [tell us] just take notes, give us a test, and show us some pictures; and I think this was a fun way to learn about history. So, I read the book and I learned about the Holocaust, more than what I knew about the Holocaust. I have new...insight. Also, *The 9/11 Report*, it wasn't boring reading it because there was pictures and there was facts. Usually, [in history class] they give us notes on the smart board and we take it down, and that's it. It's hard for me to memorize it. So I just didn't like history, but reading these books was like it was fun because I took insights, but I also had fun reading it.

This comparison initiated an interesting conversation about how comic books generally make learning more interesting and inviting. One notable comment came from Michael who reported that “If people would actually put comic books in the system of education itself it would probably teach us a lot more than we’re learning [now in history].” To which a chorus of students responded with an enthusiastic “Yeah!”

Through their discussions, students also discovered a sense of relevancy in the texts, something they do not typically associate with traditional ELA learning. While reading the graphic novels, they made connections to their favorite television shows, popular films, and even their social networking practices, as one student noted,

On Facebook or anything like that now you have timelines, so it kind of looks like little panels of time [like a graphic novel]. I feel like the graphic novels—it won’t teach you how to be a rocket scientist on the computer, but it will open up your mind to what it looks like so when you look at it you’ll be like “oh yeah, I learned about this once.”

These real-life connections encouraged students to question why such opportunities for learning are not more present in the ELA curriculum, a radical departure from their earlier conceptualization that such texts were educationally irrelevant, if not academically deviant. In our final interview, students pressed for a more multidisciplinary and multimodal model of ELA, arguing that such texts should be included to engage more students in different kinds of learning:

Maria: Yeah, I think that there should be Shakespeare every year, but I think they should also include a different type of genre that should be required to be read like comics books one year...just to expose people to different varieties of text.

Hindi: Why?

- Maria: Because they could find something they liked better...just something different so that maybe they would read more...and because it's important to know.
- Samah: I just think *Persepolis* and *Maus* would be interesting books to have in a history class because I know history is tough for some people...I don't think anyone knew about Iran and all that stuff because we don't learn about that in history class.
- Aubrey: Yeah, Samah and I were talking about this because we were learning about Syria and stuff in our world history class, but that's just an elective so most of us in school don't learn about those cultures or people. These books would be a cool way to introduce people to these cultures and events...and different ways of seeing the world.

Students also described how the method of learning graphic novels expanded their understanding of the traditional ELA instructional approach. Initially students did not enjoy reading the graphic novels aloud together in class; they found it to be arduous and unhelpful as they struggled to make sense of the text:

When we're reading in class, Ms. K. will say 'stop' and it's kind of sometimes really hard to get it going again in your head...Also when you read aloud in class, you have to keep with some outside pace- not the one in your head...When you're at home you can process it how you need to [in a really fluid way] and you don't need to stop for anybody.

In contrast, they reported being most engaged when they were given time to read the text at their own pace and then share their thoughts either with one another or within a class discussion. They felt that these lessons, unlike most of their other classes, were student-driven and interesting as Brianna explained:

Yeah, I liked the class more because we're talking more. When we read a typical book the teacher tells us to go home and read it and we're like "no," cuz who wants to read this? Who wants to just read words and then it makes us tired and stuff... But if the teacher gave us more time to talk about the subject in school then we have

more fun in class discussing it and we would participate more like when we were drawing the comics by ourselves, we had ideas. We didn't just respond to questions on a test.

In this way, students felt that the instructional approach gave them the opportunities to share their opinions and talk to one another which helped them develop a richer understanding of what they were learning:

Latisha: Yeah, I think it was better me reading it on my own because then when we come in, we have our own thoughts. ...When we read it in class, we're reading it just waiting for the teacher to say something and waiting for the teacher to talk. But when we're reading it on our own, we make our own thoughts and then we come in class and we put all our thoughts together and everyone has different perspectives and opinions, so then we elaborate on that and then there's more to look into. One time I thought that some part of the text was different, but then somebody else [in my group] they didn't agree with me so then we put it together which made me understand more.

Aubrey: Yeah, it was the Cadillac thing...if I would have never talked to Latisha or if Latisha would have never talked to me, I would have my opinions and she would have her opinions and then we'd both be confused [because] we were be understanding the book in different ways.

Though students had different preferences for reading the texts (most liked reading silently in class and a few preferred reading independently at home), most agreed that they "liked forming their own thoughts and then bringing it back to work on it in a group [because] working with people helps [them] to understand it more." Ultimately, working together to unravel the graphic novels without the pressure of exams fostered a sense of community, challenging their conceptualization of ELA learning as a solitary, performance-based endeavor:

- Aubrey: This class is fun. Even though this class is called Creative Writing [chuckles]; I'm just saying it's a bad name because you think that we're just gonna write on our own and we hand in our assignments and that's it, but here we talk a lot and we have a lot of discussions.
- Latisha: Yeah, we learn more. You're into the book more.
- Samah: [In other classes,] we never really get to speak. It's always the teacher going rambling on and on the whole time...
- Latisha: Yeah, on and on...
- Aubrey: I hate that...
- Maria: The discussions really help us learn other points of view. You get to inform your own opinions and you get to hear other people's opinions and form more opinions off of that.
- Hindi: So that dialogue challenges your own conceptions and helps you learn?
- Maria: Yeah!
- Aubrey: I feel like as a group of seniors it brought us together because I know there are people in this class who I would not usually have long conversations with and just listening to each other's opinions, we all just kind of learn who we are a little bit, and it brought us together.

At the start of the course, most of the students in the class wanted only to work independently, to write quietly at their desks uninterrupted. While working through the graphic novels, instruction shifted considerably and in doing so, the class reframed itself as a community of individual, but supportive, collaborating learners. In addition to expanding their understanding of reading and writing as solitary activities, working with graphic novels transformed how students understood learning within the ELA classroom.

Conclusion

Though there are many different ways to teach graphic narratives, this chapter considered two major approaches. Here I discussed why a traditional ELA method, which focuses on building basic literacy skills, is generally ill-suited for graphic narratives because it does not provide adequate tools with which to address and explore the pluralism or multimodality of such texts. As a result, such an approach seems to ultimately limit opportunities for making meaning in graphic narratives. In contrast, a multiliteracies pedagogy speaks to the multiplicity and integration of various modes of meaning-making and addresses how “linguistic and cultural differences [are] central in the pragmatics of the working, civic, and private lives of [learners]” (The New London Group, 1996, para. 1). This type of pedagogy provides a systematic method for analyzing such texts, an approach that seems to be more congruent with the textual nature of the graphic narrative. Evidence of the effectiveness of this method was seen in this study. Though the graphic novels were taught primarily through a traditional ELA model, instances where the instructor accessed a more multiliteracies-like approach, student learning appeared to be richer and deeper. Findings for this study also suggest that it is not just the text or the instructor that makes a multiliteracies pedagogy possible, but a combination of both.

While this chapter has attempted to draw a clear distinction between a traditional ELA model and a multiliteracies pedagogy, these approaches do not divide so neatly. This chapter suggests that the graphic novel is a unique kind of text that requires students to learn different strategies in order to maximize their ability to make sense of it; techniques that are unlike those they need to read a traditional print-based book. To

accomplish this, these findings indicate that the graphic novel may necessitate a different kind of instruction model—such as a multiliteracies pedagogy—in which to provide readers with well-matched strategies to scaffold them as they make their way through the text.

In highlighting some of the challenges teacher may face when working with graphic novels, these findings suggest that integrating such texts in the classroom is not necessarily as seamless or simple a process as it is often presumed to be (Crawford, 2004, McTaggart, 2005). Addressing the pervasive belief that graphic novels are easy to use and that all teachers, regardless of training, can embed a graphic novel in their curriculum, this study stresses the importance having professional training, using an appropriate instruction approach, and supporting student learning through text-specific strategies. This research also challenges the notion that students can simply be given a graphic novel during, for example, Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) time and be expected to “develop lifelong reading habits” (Crawford, 2004, p. 26). These findings suggest that both instructors and students may require additional training and support in order to utilize graphic novels effectively in their classrooms.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Within the current educational climate, many adolescents, particularly at the secondary level, struggle to achieve literacy proficiency (NAEP 2010, 2011). One factor that may be contributing to these poor proficiency levels is the curriculum, particularly the type of texts being used to develop literacy in school. These materials tend to reflect traditional notions of text that are believed to develop skills necessary to succeed on standardized assessments (Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Parmar & Krinsky, in press; Phelps, 2011; Reback et al., 2011). Many ELA classrooms continue to privilege traditional literary texts and linguistic modes of meaning despite the fact that developing the skills to read certain alternative texts, like graphic novels, can make students better, more engaged readers (Carter, 2007; Krashen, 2005; Schwarz, 2006). The graphic narrative can also be used to improve reading proficiency by providing opportunities for students to develop multimodal reading and critical literacy skills (Dyson, 1997; Carter, 2007; Hatfield, 2005; Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Schwarz, 2007; Versaci 2001)

Though researchers continue to call on educators to use graphic novels to develop comprehension, writing quality, critical literacy, and even build vocabulary (Boatright, 2010; Calo, 2010; Chun, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Lawrence et al., 2009; Smetana et al., 2009), the general theoretical literature has yet to explore how readers adjust to the unique textual affordances of the graphic narrative or how instruction impacts this learning process. Noting this absence, this study set out to explore how secondary students responded to four different graphic narratives that they read in their ELA course. This study also emerged from the two schools of thought regarding graphic novels which seem to generally disagree on what the reading landscape of this type of texts looks like,

prompting differing opinions of what the academic purpose of the graphic narrative should be. Within the first school of thought, there are those that argue that the graphic narrative represents a new kind of text, possessing unique affordances that can be difficult to navigate (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; McCloud, 1996). In contrast, within the second school of thought, there is a widespread belief that the graphic narrative is an easily accessible text that innately appeals to young people (Krashen, 2005; McTaggart, 2005; Mendez, 2004; Mooney, 2002; Thomas, 1996). Within this context, the study sought to answer two questions: How do students respond to the unique textual affordances of graphic narratives? How does instruction shape students' understanding of graphic novels?

This study observed a class of twelfth-graders in a co-educational four-year public high school in New Jersey as they studied a series of four graphic novels in an ELA elective course. The study employed an embedded case study approach (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009) and considered the entire class—its students, instructor, the learning environment—as the case and each participating student as an individual unit of analysis. In accordance with the typical case study approach, the data were derived from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007) including observations, interviews, artifacts, and documents (Yin, 2009). Generally, data was gathered on-site and included frequent observations of the class at-work, interviews with students and the instructor, discussions with the entire class, and analysis of student assignments (including reading responses, surveys, illustrations, photographs, and midterm exam papers).

Generally, students grasped some of the key textual differences quickly while others continuously frustrated or eluded them entirely. Though instruction and practice

helped them grow adept at navigating some textual features, such as practicing closure, students typically missed opportunities to examine some of the most unique elements of the graphic narrative, such as its use of extradiegetic space to shape narrative. These findings support the view of a number of researchers who argue that graphic narratives are challenging to read, even more so than traditional print-based texts (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; Risko, et al., 2011). This study seems to indicate that readers may require instruction specific to graphic novels in order to fully access the unique textual affordances and maximize the learning potential of these kinds of texts. Findings also suggest that students may require additional training in order to understand how the different layers of the graphic narrative operate, specifically the pictures which typically function as a type of shorthand that depends on the reader to draw background knowledge in ways that are different from traditional text.

This study considered how two major approaches, a traditional ELA method and a multiliteracies pedagogy, impacted how students' understood the texts. The traditional ELA method, which did not seem to fully address the pluralism or multimodality of the graphic narratives, ultimately limited opportunities for student learning. In contrast, instances of instruction that reflected a multiliteracies pedagogy seemed to expand opportunities for student learning by addressing not only different modes of meaning-making, but by encouraging critical thinking as well. These findings suggest that the graphic novel may be better suited for a nontraditional instructional approach, especially one like a multiliteracies pedagogy that more fully addresses its multimodal and pluralistic features.

Implications for Practice

Contrary to the mainstream belief that “if you acquire graphic novels, young adults will come,” (Mooney, 2002, p. 18), most of the students featured in this study did not initially respond favorably to the inclusion of graphic narratives within the classroom. Because they are situated within youth culture, it is often presumed that all young readers will readily engage with them. This study suggests that this is not always the case; not all young people instantly identify with this particular aspect of youth culture or appreciate its inclusion in the classroom. As a result, educators should perhaps be prepared to help them engage with graphic novels, to help develop interest and motivation. This study indicates that the argument to include the graphic narrative as a gateway text with which to entice reluctant readers to reading may not be sufficient for all learners. Instead, teachers should prepare for the possibility that some young readers may not respond favorably to these materials and even actively resist working with them within the classroom.

Contrary to the widespread assumption that “all students are accustomed to reading comics” (Thomas, 1996, p. 4), the students featured in this study struggled a great deal to do so effectively. In particular, most—even those that read comics at home—had a difficult time accessing the unique affordances of this type of text and were challenged by the requirements of multimodal reading. They struggled to use word and image to navigate the page layout, practice closure, and understand how to read and integrate meaning from both the diegetic and extradiegetic spaces of the texts. Though students ultimately became more proficient at navigating certain elements of the text, they did so without a guiding framework or explicit instructional training, and as a result, expressed

some frustration and disinterest in the process. These findings suggest that while some educators argue for the inclusion of graphic narratives, particularly to support struggling readers, (Crawford, 2004; McTaggart, 2005) they may be ignoring the reading complexities of this type of text. As a result, graphic novels might not be well-suited for weak and reluctant readers. Alternatively, if teachers want to use such texts in their classrooms, they may need to prepare to present the material within an appropriate instructional framework and provide their students with text-specific strategies for meaning making.

Though students did encounter some challenges and even expressed some frustration in the process, at the conclusion of the study, most reported having enjoyed reading the graphic narratives. In particular, the majority of the class reported having enjoyed the last graphic novel they read—*Persepolis*—the most, and first graphic novel—*Understanding Comics*—the least. These students reported that they were most interested in *Persepolis* because of its straightforward storyline, identifiable characters, and cartoonish drawing style. In contrast, a handful of students vocalized a preference for *Understanding Comics*, reporting that they enjoyed its detailed explanation of the comics' language and non-narrative structure. Though these students were in the minority, this suggests that, like traditional print-based books, graphic narratives appeal to readers in different ways.

Students perhaps also enjoyed reading *Persepolis* more than *Understanding Comics* because it was the last text they read, meaning they had by then developed some proficiency in reading comics, suggesting that students require sustained exposure and instructional training to read this type of text successfully. In exploring how high school

students experienced reading graphic narratives within the ELA classroom, findings of this study suggest several implications for practice. Teachers who want to incorporate graphic narratives effectively in their classrooms should not only receive special training to work with alternative texts, but ensure that their instructional model is appropriate for the material and that they are supporting student learning with text-specific strategies.

Training Teachers to Work with Alternative Texts

As Alvermann and Wilson (2007) argue, “Literacy educators, teacher educators, and researchers alike simply do not have adequate training in interpreting modes outside of writing and speaking” (p. 22). They argue that educators require “ongoing quality professional development with ample support for incorporating the new literacies and multimodal designs into their curricula” (p. 23). This study suggests that such training is essential, especially when teachers work with alternative texts like the graphic novel in their classrooms. It affirmed that among teachers who include such texts in their curriculum, most continue to privilege print-based or linguistic modes of meaning (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007). Many, though well-intentioned, are simply ill-equipped to expand the range of classroom learning to include multimodalities (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007). Though many teachers choose to include alternative texts like graphic novels because they presume such materials will help engage their students in reading, findings for this study suggest that they must be prepared to access the unique affordances of these kinds of text by instructing their students how to read multimodally.

Additionally, teachers must also recognize that including alternative texts like the graphic novel in their curriculum is a political choice. Youth culture is not only generally ignored in academic settings, but the views expressed in most graphic novels are typically

nonmainstream. In this way, teachers should recognize that the instructional decision to include such texts is “situated within beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning... [and how] knowledge can be transmitted—and these beliefs are themselves situated within historical traditions of schooling within a particular culture” (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007, p. 8). Thus, the inclusion of texts like the graphic novel is “imbued with historical, personal, political, and cultural ideologies” (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007, p. 8) and ignoring these framings within the classroom minimizes the learning potential of such materials. In this way, teachers may require training with which to talk to their students about these embedded ideologies, a critical language with which to analyze the underlying assumptions and expectations of text and other aspects of school-based learning (Parmar & Krinsky, in press). Findings from this study suggest that presenting a graphic novel in its ideological contexts would not only expand the traditional curriculum, but provide students with the opportunity to develop critical literacy skills.

Though Sara did have the support of her school to include the graphic narratives in her classroom, she had no professional development to help her do so. Instead, she mostly taught the course as she had learned the material as an undergraduate at Rutgers. This study suggests that working with alternative texts within an educational context may require specialized pre-service training or in-service professional development. To help teachers avoid approaching the graphic novel as just a “cool” book that their students will like, they must be able to recognize its unique textual affordances and utilize its distinctive learning opportunities. To do this, instructors must receive training on how to develop and impart appropriate literacy strategies so that the material is rendered both accessible and comprehensible to their students.

Selecting an Appropriate Instructional Approach

Deconstructing many of the traditional notions of literacy, a number of scholars argue that the graphic novel is representative of a new type of text (Chute, 2008; Hatfield, 2005; McGrath, 2004) and may be unlike most of the texts students are likely to encounter in school. For this reason, it is important that teachers using this type of text select an appropriate instructional approach that highlights and supports its textual distinctions. Ideally, such an approach would address the multimodal features of the graphic narrative while also critically positioning its creative content.

Findings from this study suggest that instruction played a major role in shaping students' understandings of graphic narratives. When the class studied the texts using a traditional ELA approach, they missed opportunities to explore their unique features. Approaching the graphic novels using a narrow, monomodal, and literary lens ultimately left many students feeling frustrated because they were unable to comprehend fully what they were reading and what was actually there in the text. Findings from this study support the argument that multimodal texts like graphic novels cannot be fully understood without drawing on various semiotic systems; privileging one mode over the other ultimately shortchanges the full meaning of text and restricts the reading experience (Jewitt, 2005; The New London Group, 2000).

In contrast, instances of instruction that accessed a multiliteracies pedagogy seemed to better equip students to read the text. This approach expanded students' learning opportunities which in turn, cultivated more sophisticated understandings of graphic narratives, multimodal reading, and even ELA learning (The New London Group, 1996). In this way, this study suggests that teachers consider their instructional approach

before working with materials like the graphic novel to ensure that their teaching method is well suited to the demands of the text (Hatfield, 2005, Risko, et al., 2011).

Additionally, texts like the graphic novel not only defy genre (Chute, 2008; Eisner, 2008), but move across disciplines. As a result, teachers of English who decide to include graphic narratives in their curriculum should be prepared to step outside their content area in order to support their students as they read the text. According to Rothstein and Rothstein (2007), “Traditional academic disciplines in high schools often resemble silos. The grain stored in one never interacts with the grain stored in another” (p. 21). However, findings from this study suggest that such an approach does not work well with graphic narratives, which typically blend many literary genres and textual formats.

Supporting Student Learning with Text-Specific Strategies

Oftentimes teachers who choose to include graphic narratives in the classroom presume that students, by virtue of their age and multimodal literacy habits, are innately interested in and capable of navigating this type of text successfully (Mooney, 2002; Thomas, 1996). Findings from this study indicate that this is not necessarily the case. Though many students were aware of the features of comics and some had even read a few titles, none were fully prepared to navigate the text independently. Students struggled to adjust to the reading landscape of the text and required instructional support to do so effectively.

When Sara’s class was initially challenged by the texts, she reminded them to do “what good readers to,” to employ traditional reading strategies. Though students were familiar with these techniques and tried using them when reading the graphic narratives, most reported that they were not helpful and grew increasingly frustrated. In this way,

findings from this study suggest that traditional reading strategies, which address only the linguistic elements of a text, may not appropriately scaffold student learning. Instead, traditional comprehension strategies either need to be adapted to better accommodate the unique textual affordances of graphic novels or unique strategies must be developed, ones that speak to the multimodal and discursive nature of this type of material.

In addition to struggling to apply traditional comprehension strategies, students had a difficult time reading the graphic narratives using the methods Sara selected. Over time, they tried reading the texts aloud together, independently at home, and independently or with a partner in class. Of all the approaches, students reported that the last one—reading independently or with a partner in class—was the most successful and enjoyable. Students liked having the opportunity to work with a friend or to consult with Sara if they had questions about the text. Most importantly, they reported that reading the graphic narratives in this manner allowed them to set their own reading pace, to *immerse* themselves in the story, giving them more of an opportunity, as Weinstein (2006) argues in her research on high school rappers, to foster a sense of pleasure. These findings suggest that as with traditional reading, teachers must be adaptive in how they support student learning, adjusting their approach to support readers while providing them with the opportunity to engage deeply—and even find pleasure—in the material.

Findings from this study suggest that working with graphic novels also provides a ripe opportunity for teachers to build on students' nonacademic literacy practices. Multimodal works like graphic narratives share many of the same underlying principles as other forms of media, especially digital literacies, which many young people engage with on a daily basis in innovative ways (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Jewitt, 2005;

Williams, 2008). Instead of positioning such materials as antithetical to academic goals, this study—as others—suggests that these different types of literacies be used to complement and support “students’ literacy growth overall” (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007, p. 23; see also Albers, 2003; Faulkner, 2005; Jewitt, 2005). In this way, this study also supports the argument that teachers should “treat texts as tools for learning rather than as repositories of information to be memorized and then all too quickly forgotten” (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007, p. 20).

Working with alternative materials also gives teachers a chance to engage in a dialogic pedagogy, to initiate a conversation over “what constitutes meaningful knowledge” (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. xi). This study suggests that alternative texts like graphic narratives can potentially be used as educational tool through which students can critically examine both their personal and academic literacy practices. This study demonstrated that the graphic narratives used in this course exposed the class to the voices, histories, and experiences of marginalized groups while also helping them recognize the intellectual richness of nonacademic texts.

Policy Implications

In the age of No Child Left Behind many teachers feel unduly pressured to meet the demands of adequate yearly progress (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Parmar & Krinsky, in press). Despite these more concerted efforts, overall proficiency levels do not seem to be improving. While NCLB does not specify the type of texts to be used in secondary classrooms, it does seem to discourage teachers from taking curricular risks (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Phelps, 2011; Reback et al., 2011). Findings from this study suggest that the graphic novel can be used to encourage

proficiency, and as result, supports the argument—as does much existing research—that curricular choices be expanded to include more opportunities for multimodal reading and critical literacy (Alvermann & Wilson, 2007; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Parmar & Krinsky, in press; Street, 1995).

Such an epistemological shift would not doubt necessitate continued professional development. In today's literacy environment, where text continuously evolves and innovates, it is essential that teachers stay current and up-to-date. For example, professional development workshops should not only expose teachers to their students' latest literacy practices, but also provide them with the opportunities to develop new methods with which to build on these practices within their classrooms (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Though implementing this type of training would undoubtedly be challenging, as it would require school resources, teacher interest, and administrative support, such a program could potentially have a tremendous impact on the literacy development of students and improve their overall proficiency.

Recommendations for Future Research

In order to generate achievable policy changes, research is needed to further examine several issues related to this study. Additional case studies should be conducted to explore how different teachers incorporate alternative texts like graphic novels in their classrooms. For example, one study could contrast a teacher employing a multiliteracies pedagogy with one working within a traditional ELA approach. Research can also examine how different content area teachers incorporate the graphic novel in their classrooms. Another possibility would be to examine how teachers incorporate other types of alternative types of text, besides graphic novels, within the secondary classroom

such as television shows, magazines, and popular music. It would also be helpful to explore how younger children respond to the inclusion of alternative texts within their classroom. Working to expand the curricula in K-12 classrooms, it is also important to consider the type of professional development or training teachers would require in order to utilize these kinds of text effectively in academic contexts. Additional studies could also be conducted to examine the quantifiable elements of using graphic novels in the classroom, to analyze how such texts impact the outcomes on ELA achievement.

In spite of what is often reported as the benefits of including graphic novels in the classroom, this study had demonstrated some of the unexpected challenges and unreported issues educators may face when working with such texts within an academic context. In providing a more detailed look into how secondary students respond to the use of graphic narratives within the ELA classroom and how instruction impacts that process, this research can help K-12 teachers develop their practice to support learners in “reading outside the comfort zone.”

APPENDIX A

CLASS SURVEY I

1. Have you ever read graphic novels prior to this class? [yes] [no]
2. If you checked 'yes': What are some of the titles of graphic novels you've read?

3. So far, how would you describe your experience reading graphic novels in this class?

4. So far, are you enjoying studying graphic novels in this class? [yes] [no]
If you checked 'yes': What about reading them is enjoyable to you?

If you checked 'no': What about reading them isn't enjoyable to you?

5. Do you think graphic novels are "cooler" than the texts typically read in school?
[y] [n] Why? _____

6. Do you believe graphic novels can help students do better in school? [yes] [no]
Why? _____

7. Describe your experience (challenges, benefits, etc.) reading graphic novels?

8. How does your experience reading graphic novels compare and contrast to your experience reading regular print-based texts? _____

APPENDIX B

CLASS SURVEY II

1. How would you describe your experience reading *Maus* so far? _____

2. If you're enjoying *Maus*, what **exactly** makes it so enjoyable? If you are not enjoying *Maus*, what **exactly** about the text do you not like? _____

3. In what ways has the book helped impacted your understanding of the Holocaust? _____

4. What non-print components (aka 'pictures') of the text (the lack of color, perspective of characters, foreground/background, & design) have helped you understand the story? (If applicable, please give specific examples from various pages and panels!) _____

5. What textual (aka 'words') components (vocabulary, metaphor, accent, & rhythm) has helped you understand the story? (If applicable, please give specific examples from various pages and panels!) _____

6. Has *Maus* impacted your opinion of graphic novels? If so, how? _____

7. Read the panel (It's in German!). Describe what you think is going on in this panel. Who is the speaker? What do you think they are saying? How are you inferring this? How are you figuring this out? _____



APPENDIX C
CLASS SURVEY III

A. Persepolis-based Questions:

1. How would you describe your experience reading *Persepolis*?

2. How did reading *Persepolis* impact your perspective of Iran?

3. How did reading *Persepolis* expand your understanding of graphic novels?

4. In what other ways has reading *Persepolis* impacted you?

B. Graphic Novel Questions:

1. From all the graphic novels you've read this year which one was your favorite?
[circle]

Understanding Comics (McCloud) *9/11 Report* *Maus* *Persepolis*

2. Please explain why that graphic novel was your favorite.

3. What did you learn from reading the graphic novels in this course?

4. How have you progressed in your ability to read the graphic novel format
(example, the images, color, design, space, shading, organization of panels, etc.)?

5. Will you read more graphic novels? (yes) (no)
Why?

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