David N. Rapp

Comic books' latest plot twist: **Enhancing literacy instruction**

Graphic novels can add value to literacy instruction, especially for struggling or disaffected readers.

Students need to acquire literacy skills and strategies for understanding, thinking about, and using information garnered from what they read. In formal settings, literacy training usually begins with picture books, becomes more complex with structured short story readings, and culminates in critical evaluations of classic works of literature. Instructors and parents hope that these activities will help children gain knowledge from what they read, as well as a broader appreciation for reading itself. Lifelong learning, after all, requires sustained interest in and success with understanding what others have written, making connections among the texts we read, and applying that knowledge in our everyday lives.

Despite carefully designed instructional materials and methods, many children have trouble acquiring and applying reading skills necessary to build meaningful understandings. Sometimes, the texts they get in class fail to sufficiently motivate them to learn to read or to read to learn. Literacy activities associated with texts assigned in school include formal practices that, unfortunately, fail to benefit some students. Some of us also argue that reading tasks and texts can seem unduly restrictive, given that literacy skills should transfer to other areas of students' lives — listening skills, interpersonal communication, and multimedia comprehension.

Recent reports on literacy practices have called for us to broaden classroom materials to encourage a lifelong love of reading and to include comprehension experiences that focus on reading skills but also to help students transfer those skills beyond the written word (National Council of Teachers of English, 2003). Some of these reports have focused on media literacy, for example, using television news programs and movies in classroom comprehension activities (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007). These activities are intended to help students develop core practices by integrating text and visual information in the service of building meaning, and making connections among diverse information sources.

Recently, support has grown for using comic books and graphic novels to enhance and support literacy instruction precisely by addressing these core practices. In some ways, it's surprising that the medium has only recently enjoyed such support. Stereotyped views of comics as unsophisticated, disposable entertainment, or material written to the lowest common denominator fail to consider the diversity of comic materials. Comic books (or graphic novels) can teach literacy skills and critical thinking in ways that other formats can't.

Comic book comprehension

Understanding what we read requires identifying the letters and sounds that make up words, determining the underlying concepts those words convey, relying on grammar to determine how those concepts fit together, and drawing inferences that go beyond what's explicitly stated in the text. Graphic novels require similar activity, as they include text in word balloons that convey characters' utterances and thoughts, as well as narration boxes that provide setting, background, and plot information. But, because they rely on visual depictions, comic panels recruit other processing behaviors that support comprehension.

Readers must learn to identify the differences between pragmatic features — the particular shapes of word balloons signifying characters' utterances versus the meanings of visual cues; speed lines to indicate motion; and how the contents of panels help readers understand the larger story (McCloud, 1994). Learning the "language" of comics is a literacy skill of its own that requires moving beyond focusing solely on text. This, of course, means readers must actively participate in the comic experience in a way that instructors seek to encourage during literacy instruction.

Comprehending comics requires integration of text and pictures, presented simultaneously, to account for ideas and events depicted in panels. This integration has important benefits for learning. In a recent set of projects, my colleagues and I taught college students simple procedures, such as putting together simple toys using instructions

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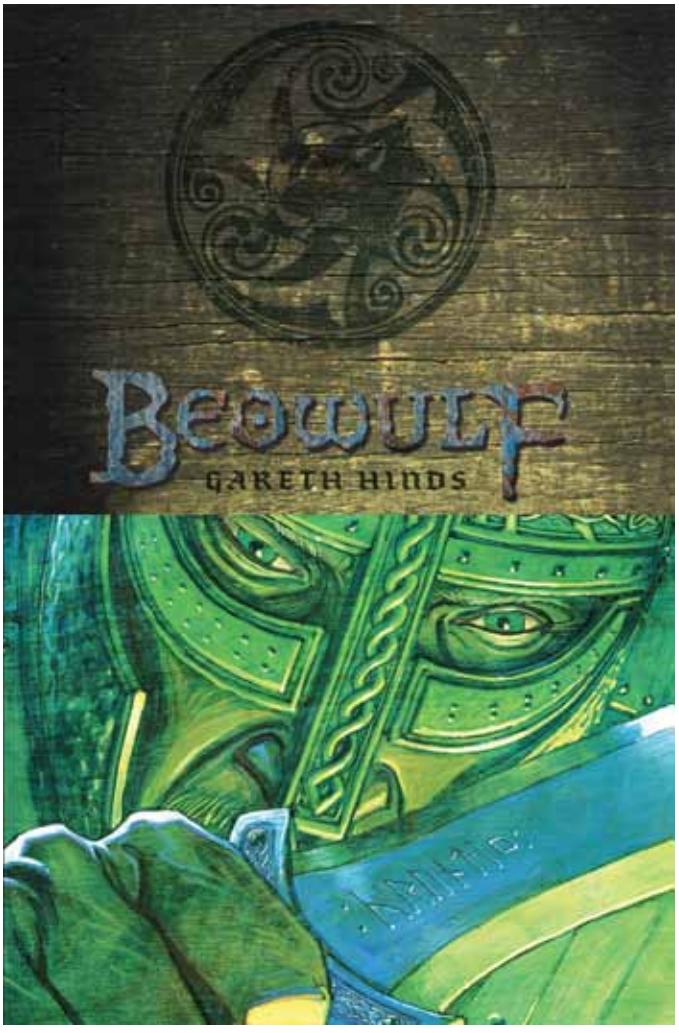
that contained only text, only pictures, or combinations of pictures and texts (Brunyé, Taylor, Rapp, & Spiro, 2006). The students were most successful at learning and later re-creating those multi-step procedures after viewing the combined text/picture presentations. Students needed to connect the visual and verbal information offered at and across each step, which also reduced the effects of a distracting secondary task that could have impeded performance. The procedural instructions were similar to comics, conveying sequential events that needed to be considered together to understand what they meant.

But literacy involves more than simply re-creating or repeating what was just read or seen. Literacy involves generating new ideas and interpreting of those materials. This necessitates the construction of inferences that help readers make connections across text elements, predicting what might happen next in a narrative, and enriching text contents based on personal experiences and thoughts. Comics, as part of their structure, can't depict everything and thus require students to draw inferences.



In a set of experiments, my colleagues and I asked students to view sequential, graphic narratives that depicted characters engaging in actions (Kopp, Magliano, & Rapp, 2011).

Each action sequence comprised three panels that included a beginning, a middle, and an end — for example, a boy running down a hill, tripping over a log near a lake, and falling in the lake. Before presenting a sequence, we removed the beginning, middle, or end panel to see whether readers would fill in any undepicted information. Students saw only edited versions of the stories, so they didn't know that we had intentionally left out some elements. After reading several of these stories, students were shown individual panels and asked whether they had seen them during reading. We tested students on panels they had seen before and panels that had been omitted. Students often said they were familiar with middle panels that they had never before seen.

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Presumably, readers inferred the missing events as they read the stories and, when tested, believed they had actually seen the omitted pictures. These findings indicate that readers are constructing inferences as they attempt to understand story events in graphic narratives. For text reading, such inferences are associated with richer understandings of stories. So, the processes that readers apply as they read comics mirror those that are crucial for reading texts, although they involve both visual and verbal information. In sum, reading comics requires, and perhaps encourages, substantial cognitive work that exemplifies the types of literacy skills necessary for comprehension.

Value-added comics

Comic books can also help develop critical thinking skills in novel ways. For example, graphic novels often present stories that continue across multiple volumes. To comprehend such events, students must consider how stories are going to advance in ways that single-volume texts normally ignore or avoid. Indeed, one popular activity for students reading literary classics is to consider what will happen to characters after a story ends. But only in a small subset of cases do characters actually reappear in subsequent stories. Many comics present stories that have gone on for decades; characters develop and mature through the years. All of that can spur students to evaluate cultural context, story innovations, character development and so on. These are complex literacy practices that complement traditional classroom activities.

Graphic novels can also serve as innovative literary supplements. For example, the most popular classics in the Western literary canon have comic adaptations. Asking students to compare original texts with adaptations encourages them to evaluate multiple sources. This could include asking students to think about the kinds of decisions that writers and artists have made with respect to including and leaving out aspects of stories. Reading an original source and comparing its contents to subsequent adaptations can foster multiple interpretations and highlight aspects of plot or historical descriptions. Some comic adaptations even differ in their cultural design or setting (consider Japanese manga as compared to West-

ern comics). These sources offer exciting opportunities for students to contemplate what makes a good story, as well as what constitutes a valid version of that story.

Comic books also provide a novel way to help students think critically about writing (Bitz, 2004). Graphic narratives include panels that depict events in systematic ways. Emulating their structure, students can use panel-driven depictions to begin outlining their own stories. These activities let students practice their creative skills as they produce cohesive event descriptions and explanations. To do so, they must make crucial decisions about how to lay out a story, where the text should go, what to show, and what the reader might infer. Contemporary software tools even make it unnecessary to draw, providing supports as simple as clip art copyboards or as complex as the actual tools used by comics creators, to help students develop their own graphic novels.

These activities enhance the literacy instruction that is traditionally used in classrooms; moreover, graphic novels prove particularly engaging to readers who need additional support. For example, boys have been more interested in comics and, because they often lag behind girls on measures of reading enjoyment and comprehension, any means of encouraging their interest is worth pursuing. More generally, young readers read less than readers from other age groups. The sheer variety of topics and stories to be found in comic books suggests that readers, regardless of their demographic characteristics and personal interests, should find titles that interest them.

Besides the expected humor, adventure, and science fiction stories, there are comics for readers of all age groups and ability levels that focus on historical events, discuss political, cultural, and scientific issues, and offer beginner's introductions to academic topics. Too few students report reading for fun, and comics offer one way of engendering excitement and interest in reading.

Challenges to implementation

Integrating comics into literacy curricula presents a variety of challenges. The first involves helping instructors get comic materials. Few publishers produce content specifically geared toward educators and their classrooms. It is also a challenge to find ways to pay for classroom comic purchases. Most K-12 grade instructors I've spoken to who use comics in their language arts coursework get them from bookstores, online sales, or their own collections. Free web comics are widely available on the Internet, and many libraries now have graphic novel collections, both of which could make comics easily available to teachers and students. Some online platforms offer comic subscription plans, which might reduce access costs as publishers and marketers eliminate paper and target new audiences.

A second challenge is that the enormous number of published comics can make it difficult to determine which titles are most appropriate for particular classrooms and activities. Teachers have to rely on their intuitions or students' suggestions. A free online resource that categorizes comics by content, the relevance of those contents to class topics, and the reading level of the material would be invaluable.

A final challenge is that there are few study guides, course resources, or other instructional supports that give teachers advice about using comics in their classrooms (Carter, 2007; Monnin, 2009). Instructors could develop their own materials, but that would place additional burdens on them. Thankfully, publishers are beginning to develop online resources for teachers to use in developing comics-based literacy coursework, and they should continue doing so. Several nonprofit groups have also offered modest supports for

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instructors using comics in classrooms. As these supports increase, barriers to adopting comics to foster student literacy will further disappear.

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