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Sequentially SmART— Using Graphic Novels across the K–12 Curriculum

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After years of controversy and debate regarding their educational merit, graphic novels have finally come of age.

In fact, today you would likely be hard pressed to find a school library collection without them. Graphic novels are now widely recognized by school librarians as a mainstream literary medium that meets the informational and recreational needs of 21st-century learners. As soaring graphic novel circulation rates indicate, the popularity of graphic novels has grown in leaps and bounds. In addition, the sequential art format helps to facilitate learning for students with a variety of learning styles and abilities. Consequently, the burning question for school librarians regarding graphic novels in schools is no longer “Should I include graphic novels in my collection?,” but “How can I use graphic novels to increase student achievement?” In order to improve student learning through the use of graphic novels, school librarians need to know how to convince others of their value, how to decide which graphic novels to use, and how to effectively integrate them across the curriculum.

CONVINCING THE NAYSAYERS

Although many school librarians and teachers value the educational and recreational benefits of graphic novels, there are still the naysayers who view them as subliterate that undermines literacy rather than enhances it. If you have colleagues, administrators, or parents who question the validity of using graphic novels with students, taking the time to inform them about the growing field of graphic novel research might help them understand the potential for using graphic novels in libraries and classrooms. The following body of research and theory can help to dispel any fears about using graphic novels in schools:

- **Boys and Male Adolescents:** A number of studies have revealed that the high interest topics and visual support found in graphic novels increased the reading motivation of boys and male adolescents (Brozo, 2002; Gavigan, 2011; Ivey & Fisher, 2006; Krashen, 2004; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Ujii & Krashen, 1996).

- **English Language Learners (ELL):** Recent studies have demonstrated the benefits of using graphic novels with English language learners (Cary, 2004; Chun, 2009; Liu, 2004). For example, Cary’s 2004 study proved that the authentic dialogues in graphic novels can help English language learners comprehend everyday English.
- **Multiple Literacies:** Other studies have shown that graphic novels can be used effectively to teach multiple literacies (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Schwarz, 2002; Xu, Sawyer, & Zunich, 2005).
- **Reading Comprehension:** Reading comics/graphic novels increases vocabulary and comprehension by helping readers decode words and events through the use of visual sequences. Krashen (2004) also found that free voluntary reading leads to higher literacy skills (Krashen, 2004; Simmons, 2003).
- **Reading Motivation:** Several studies demonstrated that the combination of text and visuals in graphic novels can motivate readers to achieve reading enjoyment and success (Botzakis, 2009; Carter, 2007; Hammond, 2009; Krashen, 2004; Monnin, 2008).
- **Special Needs Students:** Graphic novels have also been shown to have a positive impact on the reading mo-

tivation and achievement of special needs students, including deaf students, autistic students, and other students with learning differences (Gavigan, 2011, Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009; Young & Irwin, 2005).

CONNECTING TO THE STANDARDS

In addition to using research to justify the use of graphic novels in schools, librarians need to be well-versed on how national standards support the use of graphic novels across the curriculum. Sharing this information with administrators and classroom teachers can help them realize that graphic novels can be effective tools for teaching the standards. Listed below are some examples of the ways in which the AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner, and the Common Core State Standards support the use of graphic novels in libraries and classrooms:

AASL STANDARDS FOR THE 21ST-CENTURY LEARNER

1.2.3 Demonstrate creativity by using multiple resources and formats.

2.1.6 Use the writing process, media and visual literacy, and technology skills to create products that express new understandings.

4.1.2 Read widely and fluently to make connections with self, the world, and previous reading.

4.1.3 Respond to literature and creative expressions of ideas in various formats and genres.

4.1.4 Seek information for personal learning in a variety of formats and genres.

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core Standards are designed to help students acquire the skills and knowledge required for college and career readiness. The standards are provided for the English language arts (ELA), as well as for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. They provide a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010).

The following are a few examples of how graphic novels are represented in the Common Core Standards. These examples represent different grade levels for the English language arts/reading standards.

Grade 2, Reading Standard 7: Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

Grade 5, Reading Standard 7: Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

Grades 6–12, Reading Standard 10: Range, Quality, and Complexity of Student Reading: Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels.

The Common Core State Standards place a heavier emphasis on informational text/literary nonfiction in a variety of content areas than previous standards. There is also an emphasis placed on the importance of partnering fiction and nonfiction titles. According to the *New York Times*, the Common Core Standards specify that students in the fourth grade should be reading about the same amount from “literary” and “informational” texts; however, students in the eighth grade should be reading 45 percent literary texts and 55 percent informational texts. By twelfth grade, the split should be 30 percent literary and 70 percent informational texts (Santos, 2011). In addition, the Common Core State Standards emphasize critical thinking with texts in a variety of formats, including graphic novels. Understanding the importance that the Common Core Standards Initiative places on literary and informational texts can help administrators and teachers value the role that both fiction and nonfiction graphic novels can play in supporting their school’s curriculum.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

The increasing growth in the variety of library resources and formats available today means that library collections are

continually changing. This, along with shortages in funding, makes it a challenge for school librarians to know what materials to include in their library collections. Fortunately, graphic novels should fall under the collection development policies and procedures that librarians already have in place. You should select graphic novels in the same way you choose other materials, by:

- Reading reviews
- Looking at lists of recommended titles
- Determining which titles fill reading and curricular needs
- Considering age and developmental appropriateness
- Using criteria to evaluate content, writing, art, authoritativeness, and accuracy (Gavigan and Tomasevich, 2011, 12)

The explosive growth in the publication of graphics has made it easier for school librarians to locate quality titles that support the curriculum. The increase in curriculum-based titles has also been accompanied by the growth of professional selection tools and review sources. In addition to reviews in professional journals, the following selective list of resources can help you develop quality graphic novel collections for your library:

ANNUAL AWARD LISTS

- Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) Graphic Novel Core Collection (grades K–2, grades 3–5, grades 6–8)
- Harvey Awards—Best Original Graphic Publication for Younger Readers
- Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards—includes categories for younger readers, kids, tweens, and teens
- Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Great Graphic Novels for Teens

ONLINE RESOURCES WITH REVIEWS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS

Comics in the Classroom

<http://comicsintheclassroom.net/index.htm>

Graphic Classroom

<http://graphicclassroom.blogspot.com>

Graphic Novel Reporter

<http://www.graphicnovelreporter.com>

Graphic Novel Resources

<http://graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com>

Good Comics for Kids

<http://blog.schoollibraryjournal.com/goodcomicsforkids>

No Flying! No Tights!

<http://noflyingnotights.com>

PROFESSIONAL BOOKS WITH CORE LISTS OF GRAPHIC NOVELS (PUBLISHED WITHIN THE LAST FIVE YEARS)

Brenner, R. E. *Understanding manga and anime*. Libraries Unlimited, 2007. \$40.00. 978-1-59158-332-5.

Gavigan, K. W., & Tomasevich, M. (2011). *Connecting comics to curriculum: Strategies for grades 6–12*. Libraries Unlimited, 2011. \$40.00. 978-1-59884-768-0.

Graphic novels core collection. Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson. (Online Subscription Database)

Goldsmith, F. *The readers' advisory guide to graphic novels*. American Library Association, 2010. \$45.00. 978-0-8389-1008-5).

Karp, J. (2012). *Graphic novels in your school library*. American Library Association, 2012. \$50.00. 978-0-8389-1089-4).

MAKING CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Now that you are armed with research on graphic novels, information regarding national standards, selection guidelines, and review sources, you can begin collaborating with classroom teachers to use graphic novels across the curriculum. You are probably already aware of existing assignments and activities that your teachers use to support your state's K–12 curriculum. Begin by suggesting that your colleagues use graphic novels to supplement their existing classroom practices. Next, recommend graphic novel titles that will enable

teachers to offer a diverse range of reading and learning experiences for their students. Then, suggest strategies for helping teachers integrate these graphic novels into their instruction. Point out to the teachers that using graphic novels will allow them to provide more opportunities for differentiated instruction in their classrooms. As Frey and Fisher (2008) found, “this medium (graphic novels) fulfills a wide range of our students’ reading interests” (13). Once they begin including graphic novel titles in their lesson plans, teachers will quickly learn that the sequential art in graphic novels can enhance the curriculum rather than undermine it. Hopefully, they will also begin to understand the full potential of graphic novels for increasing student achievement and turn to you for additional ideas for using graphic novels with their students.

Following is a list of lesson plans for using graphic novels across the K–12 curriculum. These lessons address the national standards previously listed in this article, as well as many state and school district standards.

CONNECTING COMICS TO CURRICULUM—GRADES 3–5 CURRICULUM FOCUS—HISTORY, UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, BIOGRAPHIES

Graphic novels about history can provide an engaging alternative to sometimes-dry textbooks. Students will be more motivated to learn about the social studies topics, such as the Underground Railroad, when they can view pictures that make the period come alive.

Begin the lesson with an introduction to the Underground Railroad. Next, read aloud one or more of the following graphic novels to students. Use a document camera if one is available.

Martin, M. (2005). *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press. \$22.49. 978-0736852456

Robbins, T., & Millet, J. (2008). *Freedom Songs: A Tale of the Underground Railroad*. Minneapolis: Stone Arch Books. \$18.99. 978-1-434-20445-5

Shone, R., & Ganeri, A. (2005). *Harriet Tubman: The Life of an African-American Abolitionist*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group. \$22.95. 978-1-404-20245-0

Break the students into groups. Divide up the letters of the alphabet so that each group has several letters. Tell the students that they should create one page about a word related to the Underground Railroad for each letter that their group is assigned. They will draw a rendition of each word they select, and write two to three sentences about the word on the same page. Next, allow time for groups to explore the following websites:

Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad by Library of Congress http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/tubman/aa_tubman_rail_1.html

Social Studies for Kids—The Underground Railroad

<http://www.socialstudiesforkids.com/articles/ushistory/undergroundrailroad1.htm>

The Underground Railroad by National Geographic <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/kids.html>

The Underground Railroad by PBC

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2944.html>

Tell the groups to look for the following information on websites and in books:

- Who are some of the people who were involved with the Underground Railroad?
- What were the names of some of the cities that were along the route of the Underground Railroad?
- What are some additional vocabulary words/topics you can use for your letters of the alphabets?

Allow students time to research, select their words, and create their alphabet pages. When the groups are finished, have them come together and share with the class. Once all of the ABC sheets are complete, bind them into an “Underground Railroad ABC Book.”

Closure:

Ask the students the following questions:

- If you were a slave, would you try to escape on the Underground Railroad even if it meant that you would prob-

ably be beaten or killed if you were captured? Why or why not?

- Would you take the risks that Harriet Tubman and others did to help a slave escape to freedom, even if it meant you might be put in prison if you were caught? Why or why not?

CONNECTING COMICS TO CURRICULUM—GRADES 6–8

*This lesson plan is adapted from the book, *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* (Gavigan & Tomasevich, 2011).

CURRICULUM FOCUS—SPACE EXPLORATION, EARTH AND SPACE SCIENCE, HISTORY OF SPACE EXPLORATION

Science-based graphic novels offer students a colorful and engaging way to learn about topics from atoms to x-rays. In the following lesson, you can teach middle school students about space exploration through the use of graphic novels and websites. Begin by presenting the students with an overview of the history of space exploration from the 1960s to the present. Next, have the students break into literature circles and read one or more of the following graphic novels on space exploration:

- Abadzis, N., & Sycamore, H. *Laika*. First Second, 2007. \$17.95 9781596431010. This is a fictionalized account of the Russian space program and the first dog in space.
- Adamson, T. K., Purcell, G., & Beatty, T. *The first moon landing*. Capstone, 2007. \$22.49. 9780736864923.
- Jeffrey, G., & Lacey, M. *Incredible space missions*. Rosen Publishing's Rosen Central, 2008. \$30.60. 9781404210905.
- Ottaviani, J., Cannon, Z., & Cannon, K. *T-minus: The race to the moon*. Aladdin, 2009. \$12.99. 978-1416949602.

After they finish reading their books, have the students visit the following websites.

- National Air and Space Administration's website on Space Exploration
- <http://solarsystem.nasa.gov/educ/howweexplore.cfm>
- National Air and Space Administration's website on Space Flight
- <http://spaceflight.nasa.gov/home/index.html>
- Space Today Online's website on the history of animals in space
- <http://www.spacetoday.org/Astronauts/Animals/Dogs.html>

Have each group create a paper or online poster using Glogster, providing five facts about space exploration that they learned from the graphic novels and websites. Have each group share their final product with their classmates.

For a culminating activity, engage the students in a discussion about space exploration using the following questions:

- In 1962, President John F. Kennedy said in a speech, "In a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon it will be an entire nation. For all of us must work to put him there." What did President Kennedy mean by that quote?
- Do you think animals should be used in space exploration programs? Why or why not?
- Some people believe that too much funding is spent on funding the space program. Do you agree or disagree?

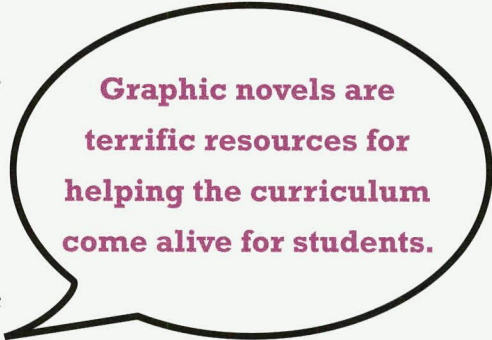
Closure: Have students discuss the impact of space exploration on their lives, and what they think the future of the space exploration program will be in the United States.

CONNECTING COMICS TO CURRICULUM—GRADES 9–12

**This lesson plan is adapted from the book, *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* (Gavigan & Tomasevich, 2011).

CURRICULUM FOCUS—SCIENCE, BIOGRAPHIES, HISTORY SCIENCE

Graphic biographies about scientists can provide students with a meaningful, in-



Graphic novels are terrific resources for helping the curriculum come alive for students.

quiry-based experience. The illustrations in graphic novels provide an added glimpse into the details of famous people, and can make a complex subject more accessible to students new to the topic. Use the following award-winning graphic novel titles by Jim Ottaviani as part of a unit about the lives and contributions of scientists. Ottaviani's books encourage critical thinking and problem solving since he sometimes drops the reader into the middle of a story while providing clues about what happened before or after.

After students are assigned a scientist from one of Ottaviani's titles, have them break into groups and use the following biographies and collective biographies to learn more about their scientist.

Ottaviani, J. *Bone sharps, cowboys, and thunder lizards: A tale of Edwin Drinker Cope, Othniel Charles Marsh, and the gilded age of paleontology*. G.T. Labs, 2005. \$22.95. 0-9660106-6-3.

Ottaviani, J. *Dignifying science: Stories about women scientists*. G. T. Labs, 2003. \$16.95. 978-0-9788037-3-5.

Ottaviani, J. *Fallout: J. Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard, and the political science of the atomic bomb*. G.T. Labs, 2001. \$19.95. 0-9660106-3-9.

Ottaviani, J. *Feynman*. First Second, 2011. \$29.99. 9781596432598.

Ottaviani, J., & Badger, M. *Two-fisted science: Stories about scientists*. G.T. Labs, 2001. \$14.95. 978-0-9788037-4-2.

Ottaviani, J., & Purvis, L. *Suspended in language: Niels Bohr's life, discoveries, and the century he shaped*. G.T. Labs, 2004. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-9788037-2-8.

Once the students have read about their scientist in the graphic novels, allow time for them to locate additional information

about him or her through the following resources:

- Other biographies and trade books about scientists
- Encyclopedia article (online or hard copy)
- Journal article from an online database
- Science-related Web site

When they have examined the data from these resources, ask the students to compare the information they obtained. As they work on their assignments, have students share the information that they acquire in their groups through Google Docs.

Using the information that they share in Google Docs, have the students collaborate and prepare and present an oral report to the class that addresses the following questions:

- What scientific advances was your scientist involved with? What were the problems that your scientist saw and tried to solve?
- Why were his or her accomplishments significant?
- Who, and what, influenced your scientist?
- What obstacles did your scientist face and why? How were the obstacles related to the time period?
- Did your scientist's work build on the work of other scientists? Did other scientists work build upon his or her work?
- How would you rate the resources that you used for this report? Compare and contrast the resource as far as the accuracy of the information, the most informative, the most engaging, etc.

Closure: Have the class discuss some of the characteristics common to the scientists that they studied in class.

FOR ADDITIONAL IDEAS ON HOW TO USE GRAPHIC NOVELS ACROSS THE K-12 CURRICULUM, PLEASE SEE THE FOLLOWING TITLES, PUBLISHED WITHIN THE LAST FIVE YEARS

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ing with images. Corwin, 2012. \$31.95. 9781412936842.

Bitz, M. *When commas meet kryptonite: Classroom lessons from the comic book project.* Teacher's College Press, 2010. \$23.95. 0807750654.

Carter, J. Bucky. *Building literacy connections with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel.* National Council of Teachers of English, 2007. \$30.95. 978-0-8141-0392-0.

Frey, N., & Fisher D. *Teaching visual literacy: Using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills.* Corwin Press, 2008. \$36.95. 9781412953122.

Gavigan, K. W., & Tomasevich, M. *Connecting comics to curriculum: Strategies for grades 6-12.* Libraries Unlimited, 2011. \$40.00. 978-1-59884-768-0.

Monnin, Katie. *Teaching graphic novels: Practical strategies for the secondary ELA classroom.* Maupin House, 2010. \$24.95. 978-1-934338-40-7.

Rourke, James. *The comic book curriculum: Using comics to enhance learning and life.* Libraries Unlimited, 2010. \$35.00. 978-1-59884-396-5.

FROM ARCHIE TO ZEUS—GRAPHIC NOVELS, THE CURRICULUM, AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

A growing number of school librarians and teachers acknowledge that graphic novels have a place in the curriculum, since they "help students critically examine aspects of history, science, literature, and art" (Scholastic, 2012, 5). They recognize that graphic novel titles represent a wide range of subjects and grade levels, and their engaging and accessible format makes them appealing to struggling readers and to those who are college bound. The combination of illustrations and text in graphic novels has proven to facilitate students' reading motivation and comprehension, and they offer students a variety of entertainment and educational experiences that can help them become lifelong readers. Graphic novels can serve as curriculum-based tools that support the instructional program and

enhance content area learning. Whether they are reading Archie graphic novels for entertainment, learning about the holocaust through *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), or enjoying mythological adaptations about gods and goddesses, graphic novels are an appealing 21st-century literary medium that can help your students become sequentially smART.

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Graphic novels are a mainstream literary medium that can help your students become sequentially smART.

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