

FEATURE

CREATING

SUPER
HEROES

bringing

GRAPHIC NOVELS
INTO 6-12 INSTRUCTION

Mindy Tomasevich

mtomasevich2@gmail.com

After a decade of debate, graphic novels are permanent fixtures in most school libraries. Many school librarians and teachers have come to see the educational benefits of graphic novels after observing highly engaged readers with improved literacy skills. Using graphic novels within the school curriculum to increase student learning, however, is a relatively new concept. Educators, as they create lessons, are always on the lookout for fresh resources that will motivate and inspire students. With the tremendous popularity of graphic novels, along with the great variety of high-quality titles, the next step seems obvious. It is time to bring graphic novels into classrooms.

Graphic Novels and Literacy

Studies show that when students choose their own reading materials, based on their interests, they become better, more passionate readers (Krashen 2004). Often, graphic novels are what students want to read. A growing body of research has demonstrated the educational value of using graphic novels with males, reluctant readers, English Language Learners, special needs students, and children of varying ability levels (Carter 2007; Cary 2004; Gavigan 2011). In addition, visual literacy plays an important role in both reading comprehension and effective communication (Frey and Fisher 2008). Today's adolescents are surrounded by images and must be adept at interpreting them. Graphic novels can be effective tools to make students more literate and, as a result, more successful in school.

Over the past several years, the number of graphic novels for children and adolescents has grown exponentially, as people accepted their place in bookstores, libraries, and schools. Prestigious children's

book awards, like the Printz, Scott O'Dell, and Sibert Awards, helped librarians, teachers, and parents acknowledge graphic novels as "literature." Students have become accustomed to finding the graphic novels they crave in their school libraries. The role of graphic novels in classroom instruction, however, has just begun to be examined.

Graphic Novels and the Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) include an emphasis on supplying students with sophisticated, challenging text, especially through content area nonfiction. Educators might assume that graphic novels have no part in this. The Common Core standards for Grades 6–12, however, specifically mention graphic novels, and other CCSS can be met by using them to demonstrate specific skills. For example, Reading Standard 3 for Literature 6–12 says that Grade 7 students will: "Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot.)" (NGACBP and CCSSO 2010, 36). What better way to demonstrate this skill than to show students the bleak black-and-white illustrations in G. Neri's graphic novel *Yummy: the Last Days of a Shouthside Shorty*? The graphic novel brings to life the crime-laden Chicago neighborhood as a setting that shapes the plot of the book. AASL's *Standards for the 21st Century Learner* <www.ala.org/aasl/standards> also support the use of graphic novels with classroom instruction, calling for the use of "a variety of formats and genres" (AASL 2007, 7). Graphic novels can be used to creatively meet these standards, making graphic novels valuable resources to use with lessons often taught in middle and high school.

Creating Superlearners

The increase in exceptional curriculum-related fiction and nonfiction graphic novels for adolescents has made it easy to use graphic novels for student learning. Graphic novels can make the leap into classrooms in two ways: as a subject-area resource and as an instructional strategy.

Selecting graphic novels for curricular content is easier than ever. Print and online reviews are plentiful, and there are many "Best Of" lists of titles. School librarians don't need to be graphic novel experts to easily include them on their purchase lists. But school librarians *are* curriculum experts and are good at matching resources to teachers' lessons and students' needs. The easiest way to begin adding graphic novels to instruction is to include subject-related nonfiction graphic novels when locating resources for teachers or recommending books for specific topics.

Don't assume that graphic nonfiction does not cover curricular topics to the same depth as tried-and-true nonfiction books; nonfiction graphic novels just cover the topics a bit differently. Differentiation is something good teachers and school librarians do all the time, finding the best resources and strategies for the success for all students. Every day, educators seek out video clips, abridged classics, authoritative websites, and high-quality books that are tailored for their diverse population of students. A graphic novel, given to the right student, is one more creative tool.

Graphic novels can also be used as part of an instructional strategy to teach specific skills. Use a graphic novel as an exemplar when teaching a complex skill, such as

finding main ideas, comparing and contrasting, or evaluating the quality of a piece of writing. Sequential art offers a wealth of visual examples to use when breaking concepts like these down into a series of steps.

Curriculum Connections

How can school librarians get teachers on board? By means of the same methods used with any new strategy—working first with teachers who are open to innovative ideas and collaboration. Quote Bloom’s Taxonomy to them and convince them that using graphic novels will require students to apply higher-level thinking skills like evaluating, synthesizing, and analyzing. Offer to adjust existing lesson plans or create new ones. Here are a few ways to easily incorporate graphic novels in lessons that are commonly taught in grades 6–12.

- Use the illustrations from wordless graphic novels like Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*, Sara Varon’s *Robot Dreams*, and the Korgi series by Christian Slade as writing prompts for creative-writing assignments.
- Integrate a few graphic novels into literature circle reading groups. They can be especially effective for students who struggle with comprehension and for English Language Learners.
- Teachers often use picture books to teach analysis of common literary elements (setting, theme, symbolism, foreshadowing). Use graphic novels to offer additional examples.
- After a lesson on the elements of nonfiction text (captions, headings, main ideas, glossary, index), practice identification

of those same elements using nonfiction graphic novels.

- As an introduction to reading a classic, or as a follow up, have students read the graphic adaptation of the classic, comparing the two versions.

Bringing Graphic Novels into Instruction

The following lesson plans, some adapted from *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* (Gavigan and Tomasevich 2011), offer specific ideas to harness the power of curriculum-based graphic novels when used with students in grades 6–12.

Middle School—Social Studies—The Holocaust

Historical graphic novels bring the past to life. The illustrations give detailed information about the time period, and can especially inspire students with little background knowledge. After an introduction to the Holocaust, have students read from these graphic novels, practicing deep, active reading activities such as pre-reading, annotating, and small group discussion.

Heuvel, Eric. 2009. *A Family Secret*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Heuvel, Eric. 2009. *The Search*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Hudson-Goff, Elizabeth, and Jonatha A. Brown. 2006. *Anne Frank*. Milwaukee, WI: World Almanac Library.

Jacobson, Sidney, and Ernie Colón. 2006. *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Speigelman, Art. 1986. *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. New York: Pantheon.

Pair these with a class reading of a text-only novel about the Holocaust, such as Hans Peter Richter’s *Friedrich*, Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, or Jerry Spinelli’s

Milkweed: A Novel. If time permits, allow students to research topics of interest, exploring these websites:

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
<www.ushmm.org>

Anne Frank House
<www.annefrank.org>

Encourage discussion, with questions such as:

Should those who mistreated the Jews be excused from their actions by claiming they were only following orders?

Could a Holocaust happen today?

What kinds of things could we do to prevent, or stop, another Holocaust?

Middle School—English Language Arts—Fairy Tales, Folktales, Myths, and Legends

Traditional literature has experienced a new popularity, thanks, in part, to Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson series. In addition to the usual resources, add some spice to a unit on the elements of fairy tales, myths, and legends by including these graphic novel adaptations.

Dembicki, Matt. 2010. *Trickster: Native American Tales: A Graphic Collection*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum.

Graphic Mythology series. New York: Rosen.

Hale, Shannon, Dean Hale, and Nathan Hale. 2008. *Rapunzel’s Revenge*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Lee, Tony. 2009. *Outlaw: The Legend of Robin Hood*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

O’Connor, George. Olympians series. New York: First Second.

Have students write their own myths, legends, fairy tales, or folktales, including the elements of

that genre while using a modern-day setting, or different cultural perspective. Let them share their stories, and discuss these questions:

Why did people create myths, legends, and folktales?

Why was oral storytelling an important tradition in the past?

Do we have any modern-day equivalents of these genres?

High School—American History—Civil Rights

The following exceptional graphic novels about the Civil Rights era have a focus that is different from sometimes-dry textbooks, and can lead students toward a deeper understanding of people and events. Note that some titles are historically accurate in their inclusion of racial epithets commonly used at the time.

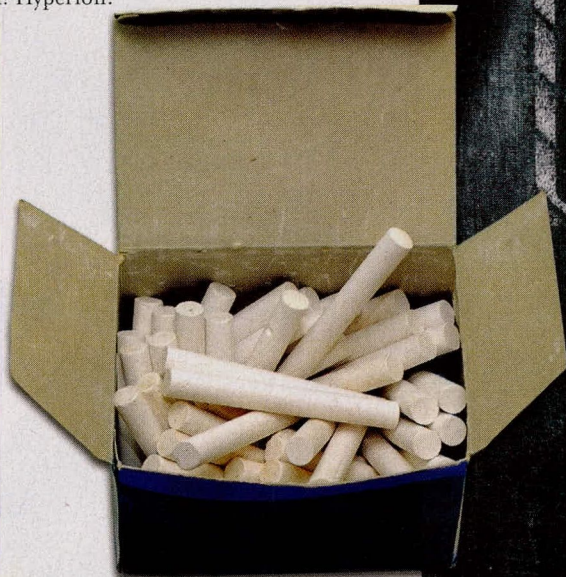
Helfer, Andrew. 2006. *Malcolm X: a Graphic Biography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Long, Mark, Jim Demonakos, and Nate Powell. 2012. *The Silence of Our Friends*. New York: First Second.

Poe, Marshall, and Ellen Lindner. 2008. *Little Rock Nine*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Santiago, Wilfred. 2011. *21: The Story of Roberto Clemente: A Graphic Novel*. Seattle: Fantagraphics Books.

Sturm, James, and Rich Tommaso. 2007. *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow*. New York: Hyperion.



TODAY'S ADOLESCENTS ARE
SURROUNDED BY IMAGES
AND MUST BE ADEPT AT INTERPRETING THEM.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

CAN BE EFFECTIVE TOOLS
TO MAKE STUDENTS

MORE LITERATE

AND, AS A RESULT,

MORE SUCCESSFUL
IN SCHOOL.

After learning about the Civil Rights era, let students choose a person or event and develop an essential question. Students can then use books, databases, and websites to research their topics. Require them to locate primary-source documents and photos, and steer them toward these websites:

National Park Service's "We Shall Overcome" <www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights>

Library of Congress's "The Civil Rights Era" <<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/aohtml/exhibit/aopart9.html>>

Have students create presentations or write papers, focusing on the answers to their essential questions. As an extension activity, read Phillip M. Hoose's *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*.

High School—Political Science—The U.S. Constitution

Students often struggle with challenging topics, such as the complexities of the U.S. Constitution and its amendments. The sequential art in graphic novels breaks the topic down into more-easily understood parts and is particularly helpful with English Language Learners, who may be new to our country. Use these titles to help students gain insight into the creation of the Constitution, how it has changed over time, and how it impacts the lives of citizens today.

Hennessey, Jonathan, and Aaron McConnell. 2008. *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Baer, Nadja. 2012. *The United States Constitution: A Round Table Comic Graphic Adaptation*. Mundelein, IL: Round Table Comics.

These websites offer primary source documents:

National Archives <www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html>

National Constitution Center <<http://constitutioncenter.org>>

Have students locate recent news articles and participate in a debate about some of the constitutional issues faced today.

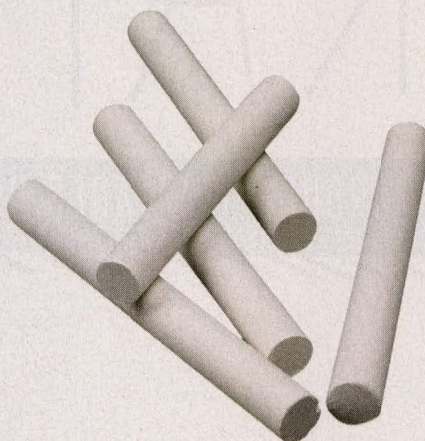
Creating Superlearners

Graphic novels motivate students and bring a fresh perspective to lessons, offering teachers and school librarians a powerful educational tool. Engage students, encourage deep thinking, and make complex topics more accessible—creating your own superlearners—by bringing graphic novels into instruction.



Mindy Tomasevich is the school librarian at Mills Park Middle School in Cary, North Carolina. She is

coauthor of *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12* (Libraries Unlimited 2011). She also cowrites the "Connecting Comics to Curriculum" column for *Library Media Connection*.



Works Cited:

American Association of School Librarians. 2007. "AASL Standards for the 21st-Century Learner." <www.ala.org/aasl/standards> (accessed September 29, 2012).

Carter, James Bucky. 2007. *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Cary, Stephen. 2004. *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Frey, Nancy, and Douglas Fisher. 2008. *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Gavigan, Karen W. 2011. "More Powerful Than a Locomotive: Using Graphic Novels to Motivate Struggling Male Adolescent Readers." *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 1 (3). <www.yalsa.ala.org/jrly/2011/06/more-powerful-than-a-locomotive-using-graphic-novels-to-motivate-struggling-male-adolescent-readers> (accessed August 22, 2012).

Gavigan, Karen W., and Mindy Tomasevich. 2011. *Connecting Comics to Curriculum: Strategies for Grades 6–12*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Krashen, Stephen. 2004. *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, and Council of Chief State School Officers. [2010]. *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. [Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers]. <www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSLELA%20Standards.pdf> (accessed September 29, 2012).

Copyright of Knowledge Quest is the property of American Library Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.