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Reading Images: The Phenomenon of Intertextuality and How It May Contribute to Developing Visual Literacy with Advanced Placement English/Language Arts Students

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This phenomenological case study attempts to understand the phenomenon of intertextuality of traditional novels and graphic novels, and how it may or may not contribute to transference of one mode of literacy to another. The study's sample was seven Grade 12 Advanced Placement English/language arts students and their teacher. I conducted my analysis using constant comparative method, and my findings suggest that intertextuality contributes to transference of traditional literacy skills to texts that are primarily images. In addition, the findings suggest that while traditional literacy aids in reading, understanding, and interpreting graphic novels, formal instruction in the arts may increase and refine students' visual literacy.

Over the last two decades, scholarship on the medium of comic books/graphic novels has emerged in a number of disciplines. Within education, there is a growing body of scholarship concerned with the medium; nevertheless, a majority of scholars ultimately conclude that one of the best justifications for comic books/graphic novels is that they provide a bridge to traditional, phonetic texts for struggling, reluctant, and nonreaders (e.g., Carter, 2007; Galley, 2004; Leckbee, 2005; McTaggart, 2005; Rapp, 2011; Snowball, 2005). While it is becoming more evident that this medium has a part to play in the development of traditional literacy, it also raises an important question: Does traditional literacy contribute to the reading of image dominated texts such as comic books and graphic novels?

Intertextuality

Many commonalities exist between making meaning from phonetic texts such as traditional novels and texts that contain images such as comic books and graphic novels (Carney & Levin, 2002; Kress, 2003). This phenomenon is what Iser (1978) termed intertextuality. Proponents of visual literacy argue that these textual commonalities allow for the development of skills in both traditional and visual literacies

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(Carney & Levin, 2002; Kress, 2003). However, the commonalities between phonetic texts and image-based texts tend to get overlooked because phonetic texts have become decontextualized from the objects they represent (Arnheim, 2004). Kress argued that when literacy is conceived of as more than just language, there is a theoretical shift from linguistics to semiotics. From a semiotics perspective, words are simply images twice removed from their original context. Sipe (1998) posited that both written text and images are sign systems that affect interpretation, and as a person reads media that incorporate both, that reader must shift between these sign systems to make meaning. Meanings are actually realized during this shifting process.

In comic books and graphic novels, a sign or a symbolic message is both narrative and visual (Varnum & Gibbons, 2001). Deriving meaning from these texts is a complicated process that relies on being able to decode both language and images (Carrier, 2000). Graphic novel readers simultaneously utilize analysis and synthesis to decode the words and the illustrations (Leckbee, 2005), which include many different kinds of verbal information through visual imagery such as onomatopoeia, thoughts, and dialogue (Carrier, 2000), as well as complicated representations of facial expressions, body language, and body positioning in addition to the symbolic encoding of certain images (Buhle, 2003).

Furthermore, the panels in comic books and graphic novels are sequential; therefore, they take on characteristics of language (Cohn, 2007; Eisner, 2008). Arnheim (2004) argued that the cognitive processes involved in viewing a word and an image are analogous, and Eisner argued that the rendering of the elements of a comic, that is the panels, figures, the arrangement of the images and the images association with other images in sequence constitutes the "grammar" of the comic narrative (p. 40). McCloud (1993) argued that even if the two images seem completely unrelated, it is inevitable that a connection will be conceived so as to move the narrative along. Cohn has taken these ideas further, arguing that structured sequential images primarily found in our culture in comics are a visual language. The process of making connections between images and panels in a comic book/graphic novel is analogous to reading words, because readers in either text decode the words or images while also creating, affirming, and rejecting their own interpretations as they read.

Visual Literacy

Callow (2003) found that the students in his study had an implicit understanding of visual texts. Nevertheless, he was concerned with how to develop this knowledge into a "richer systematic understanding" (para. 33). Pauwels (2008), a visual literacy theorist, argued that formal training in visual literacy was necessary because we tend to comprehend images passively. He concluded that if visual literacy is absent from our literacy repertoire, then we are only partially literate, because our society is inundated with imagery that is encoded with multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that are overlooked when an image is only passively engaged. Carney and Levin (2002) asserted that visual literacy should be taught alongside reading comprehension but instruction must be more than just "pay attention to the pictures,"—it must entail doing something with the images, having a purpose when reading them, and reflecting on their interpretations. Each of these scholars concluded that formal instruction in visual literacy is necessary to help students engage with images beyond the superficial.

Visual Literacy Pedagogy

Snow and Sweet (2003) argued that formal instruction plays a critical role in traditional literacy. The same is true for visual literacy, where it can strengthen students' ability to make meaning with images by providing a deeper understanding of techniques used in image creation (Callow, 2003). Kress (2003) noted that when a person encounters an image, it consists of several elements, such as lines, colors, contrasts, layouts, contradictions, iconic imagery, symbolism, and the like. Viewers must not only perceive the elements used in the work, but they must also organize these images cognitively to make meaning from them (Arnheim, 2004). However, these concepts and processes must be learned in some way. Peeck (1993) recommended that visual literacy be taught in the context of reading comprehension because of the potential of images to promote reading comprehension, particularly the ability to aid in visualization by activating prior knowledge or providing a scheme for organizing what is read. Consequently, the English/language arts classroom is a potential site for visual literacy learning when texts that contain images or are image based are introduced into the curriculum.

Drawing initially on Fang's (1996) work on the use of images in texts, Carney and Levin (2002) reported that while there were some negative effects of using images in the literacy classroom, particularly when instruction is not suitable to helping students, the majority of research on using images found that they contributed positively to children's literacy development by motivating students, promoting creativity, serving as mental scaffolds, and fostering aesthetic appreciation. They found that for images to have a positive effect, however, they needed to have a purpose. Supporting this research, Versaci (2001), a high school ELA teacher at the time, found that purposefully using graphic novels helped to tap his students' prior knowledge and develop their literacy abilities, which increased their much needed analytical and critical thinking skills.

The literature I reviewed and synthesized suggested that intertextuality may allow for transference of traditional literacy skills to texts that are primarily images; therefore, even if students lacked formal training in the arts or in visual literacy, their traditional literacy skills might still help them when reading images. The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of intertextuality and how it may or may not promote transference of one mode of literacy to another. The research questions that were used to focus the study were (1) Does intertextuality affect the students' ability to read, comprehend, and make meanings with graphic novels? Does it also affect the teacher's approach to teaching with them?, (2) Can traditional literacy skills be applied to understanding comic books/graphic novel images?, and (3) Are certain visual literacy skills necessary for making meaning from images in comic books/graphic novels?

This study supports the ideas derived from the literature because I found that intertextuality between traditional texts and graphic novels contributed to the students being able to transfer their traditional literacy skills to these image based texts. Furthermore, the findings suggest that while traditional literacy aids in reading, understanding, and interpreting graphic novels, formal instruction in the arts may increase and refine students' visual literacy.

Method

This phenomenological case study is comprised of a Grade 12 AP English classroom where graphic novels were used as part of the pedagogical approach of the teacher. This study consisted of two rounds of data collection, both collected on site. First-round data collection took place in August 2010 at the beginning of the school year and took approximately 15 hours to conduct. First-round methods included in-depth semi structured interview guides with the Grade 12 AP English teacher and seven students in this classroom, six nonparticipant observations of an AP English unit involving the graphic novel Daredevil: Born Again by Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli (1986) using an observation guide, and a structured think-aloud activity that took place during the interviews, involving an excerpt from the graphic novel Batman: The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller (1986). Second-round data collection took place in November 2010 and took approximately 11 hours to conduct. This round consisted of follow-up interview questions derived from round one data analysis and four nonparticipant observations of an additional AP English unit involving the graphic novel Superman for All Seasons by Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale (1998), using the same observation guide from round one.

Rationale

Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) posited that qualitative methodology promotes deep understanding because it allows for multiple perspectives to be voiced, making the data complex and nuanced. Corbin and Strauss (2008) asserted that a phenomenological approach to qualitative research is an attempt to understand a phenomenon, in this case intertextuality, because it requires the researcher to enter into the study with a willingness to gather data without preconceived notions of outcomes. Stake (1995) argued that case study method lends itself to a more focused and profound study of a phenomenon. A phenomenological case study approach was appropriate for this study because the primary purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon of intertextuality and how it may or may not contribute to transference of one mode of literacy to another. Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods such as interviews and observations was appropriate because they helped me to gather rich, multiple perspectives on the phenomenon being studied.

Research Site

The classroom I studied was a Grade 12 AP English classroom in a high school in a rural town in Kentucky. The classroom was covered in posters, images, and print resources. Some of the items on the wall were what a person would expect to find in a typical classroom—that is, motivational posters—as well as posters and pictures promoting traditional literary texts and posters that outline various grammatical and literary techniques; however, the room was dominated by posters of superheroes—not mass-produced education-oriented posters, but posters that a person would pick up at a comic book shop or mail order. The overall combination of items on the walls, in conjunction with the numerous class sets of texts, including class sets of graphic novels the teacher had purchased through a grant, produced an atmosphere that suggested students were going to be experiencing something a bit different with this teacher. However, the desks were arranged all in rows, and resembled a traditional classroom setup conducive to a more teacher centered pedagogical approach. Nevertheless, the teacher maintained a relatively discursive climate in the classroom by often sitting on a desk at the front of the class and engaging in discussions with the students around various topics, typically, but not always relevant to the topic being studied. The students usually did not raise their hands prior to speaking up in class and would often assist each other when ideas were being exchanged.

Participants

I found the teacher participant via purposive sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I searched for a veteran teacher who had used comic books and/or graphic novels for many years with advanced ELA students, on the assumption that he or she would not only have a refined pedagogical approach with these materials but would also feel comfortable teaching with these texts. I enacted these parameters because when I initially searched for participants I was able to find only teachers who were relatively new to the profession, that is, 1 to 3 years teaching experience, and while they were willing to teach with comic books/graphic novels, they had either never done so and/or felt they needed help doing so. I felt that a teacher who was more veteran than myself (I taught for five years) and, more importantly, who had used these texts often and comfortably, would prohibit me from taking on a mentor-type role during my study. I do believe that a study in which I helped a teacher develop pedagogy around using these texts would be compelling; however, I did not at the time fully understand using these texts in the classroom myself, having never formally used them in my teaching.

As a result of these parameters, I had a very difficult time finding a teacher for my study, but in a stroke of serendipity during a casual conversation with a friend, I succeeded: Such a teacher, Mr. Ryan (pseudonym), had taught my friend in high school. More specifically, he had taught Advanced Placement (AP) ELA students for 20 years and had used comic books/graphic novels on and off for 15 of those years in his Grade 12 AP classes. Ultimately, though I located Mr. Ryan through purposive sampling, he was nevertheless found informally.

The student participants were the students of the teacher participant during the 2010 to 2011 school year; therefore, they were found through convenience sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). No student was excluded from the study for any reason, and participation was completely voluntary. All eighteen students in Mr. Ryan's Grade 12 AP English class were potential participants; however, only seven chose to officially participate: six males and one female. Mr. Ryan taught only one Grade 12 AP English class, and had told me in his initial interview that he had tried using these texts with other levels but it was not successful. As a result I was limited to seven student participants. However, I was able to augment the data through observations of the classroom as a whole.

Prior reading of comic books/graphic novels was not a necessary parameter for the students, and of the students, only one had actively read them because his older brother had several. Unfortunately, this same student was not present in the AP English class for the second round of data collection due to poor performance the prior trimester, a problem I could not foresee, nor was I told about by the teacher until I returned in November. All participants in the study are identified by pseudonyms of their own choosing. By having the participants pick their own pseudonyms I believed that they would buy into and subsequently have a stake in the research.

It is important to note that I chose participants in an AP ELA classroom in an attempt to circumvent the prevalent conclusion of much of the scholarship on comic books and graphic novels that concludes this medium is best used to bolster traditional literacy. I assumed that the designation of "AP" suggested the students already had highly developed traditional literacy skills, and I believed that this would contribute to the study's purpose of understanding the phenomenon of intertextuality of texts and how it may contribute and/or detract to transference.

Graphic Novels in the Study

Mr Ryan's class read Daredevil: Born Again (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1986) during the unit on romanticism and symbolism. He chose this text because the main character, Matt Murdoch, aka Daredevil, is trapped in a spiraling loss of everything he holds dear because of the betrayal of a former lover, Karen Page. In addition, this graphic novel is replete with religious symbolism. The second graphic novel that Mr. Ryan chose was Superman for all Seasons (Loeb & Sale, 1998). This text, used during the unit on heroism, focused on a study of Beowulf, and Beowulf and Superman were often compared and contrasted during class. However, the graphic novel had a great deal more to offer than just the simple fact that Superman is a hero. One of the more compelling aspects of this text, discussed during my round-two class observations, is that it grounds Superman by reducing the character to his human qualities. He is portrayed first and foremost as a small-town boy who has gone to the big city, leaving behind the comforts and loves of home. While this may seem clichéd, the narrative masterfully revisits the small-town life he once knew in a recursive manner demarcated by the seasons of the year. The graphic novel's portrayal of Superman as human, yet still somehow a transcendent being, worked very well as a foil to Beowulf.

During the structured think-aloud activity I utilized an excerpt from Frank Miller's (1986) Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. (The excerpt is pages 22 to 26 of book 1 within the collected edition. These pages depict Bruce Wayne struggling with the desire/need to become Batman again after being forced into retirement 10 years prior.) I selected this text for its literary merit as well as its status in the world of comic books. Batman: The Dark Knight Returns is replete with symbolism and universal themes that resonate with people at a personal and a societal level, from the death of loved ones and the destruction of the family to concepts foundational to our country's identity, such as the individual and the struggle for freedom, as well as (and possibly counter to the latter theme) a rejection of the status quo. This text also provided a modicum of continuity with Daredevil: Born Again (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1986). I believed that the familiarity with the author might help the students feel more comfortable with analyzing this text.

Interviews

I used Kruger and Casey's (2000) interview guide structure to create an interview guide that consisted of opening questions as well as introductory, transition, key, and ending questions. I found this structure very helpful because it helped establish a rapport with the students, eased them into answering more study-focused questions, provided scaffolding to the more in-depth questions, and allowed for closure. I met with Mr. Ryan for interviews twice over the course of my data collection. The first interview took place prior to the start of the 2010 to 2011 school year, and the final follow-up interview took place at the end of the data collection in mid-November 2010. In both instances I interviewed Mr. Ryan in his classroom, and each interview lasted over an hour. I had to continue the first interview by email as our in-person time ran out when he had to go to a meeting. I also followed up through email as needed for clarification and updates. I audiotaped the interviews so that I could ask questions and allow the interview to be more of a dialogue, allowing additional questions to arise as needed; I also maintained some notations in the form of memos as necessary. I transcribed the initial interviews and used them in conjunction with the memos, the structured think-aloud activity, and the observations during analysis.

I also interviewed the student participants at the beginning of the school year during the first unit in their AP English class and then later in mid-November during another unit that also used a graphic novel. I interviewed all student participants individually in various places around the school building, with the media center being the most common place. Interviews took place before and after school to minimize the students losing instructional time in the classroom. Each student participant was interviewed twice: one initial interview and then a follow-up. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour. These interviews were also audiotaped so that I could ask questions and have a conversation without worry of having to maintain detailed notes, which I believed could potentially be intimidating to the students. I also took memos as needed during the interviews. I transcribed the initial interviews and used them in conjunction with the memos, the structured think-aloud activity, and the observations during analysis.

Observations

I conducted nonparticipant observations of the teacher participant Mr. Ryan and his students as they interacted with each other during two units that involved graphic novels. The observations were nonparticipatory because I wanted to achieve what Stake (1995) termed naturalistic observations to better understand and orient me to both the teacher and the students without influencing them with my own beliefs, positionalities, or pedagogical methods. I performed a total of 10 observations over two separate visits to the school, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes.

My observations were focused on the interactions the students had within the classroom, primarily with the teacher and with the texts they were studying, but also with the other students. I used the information gathered from these observations to construct additional questions for interviews that helped me to verify, modify, or reject my previous understandings. I used an observation guide to help organize the information collected in the classroom. The observation guide was just a guide; it did not dictate what I was observing. I also used field notes to log my observations and memos, which helped me to recall thoughts and ideas I had during the observations. My observations were very helpful because they focused my attention on the happenings in the classroom and helped give a backdrop to the interviews as well as augment them.

I found that my observations and plans were in keeping with Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland's (2006) argument that interviews and observations are interrelated; therefore, they allow for a deeper understanding of participants' views of a particular topic or experience. I found this assertion to be accurate because my observations informed my understanding of the phenomenon of intertextuality and its effect on transference of traditional literacy to visual literacy because I witnessed it firsthand within the classroom.

Structured Think-aloud

I used a structured think-aloud activity during data collection with the AP English classroom teacher and his students. During the initial interviews, the participants were asked to analyze an excerpt from Batman: The Dark Knight Returns (Miller, 1986). Smith (2006) stated that think-alouds are "verbalizations of a person's thoughts while undertaking a cognitive activity" (p. 765), and they help model the thought processes as a person reads. As the participants read the excerpt, they verbalized what they were doing cognitively to the best of their abilities, as well as asked questions as desired. I audiotaped their verbalizations so that I would not distract them from the task at hand with writing.

After the think-aloud portion was finished, I followed up with a few questions about the excerpt to ensure I gained the information I needed for the study. An example of my follow-up questions is "Describe to me your ideas about the images in the texts. Do they contribute to or hinder your understanding of it?" The think-aloud activity drew out the strategies the reader was using, such as connecting the text with prior knowledge and experience; determining the significance of aspects of the text, specifically the images; and drawing inferences and interpretations about the text's meaning. Furthermore, the placement of the think-aloud activity during the first unit of study allowed me to compare and contrast the student participants' reading and understanding of these texts during the two units, which was critical in determining the role of traditional literacy in reading these texts as well as the development and/or augmentation of their visual literacy. All of these findings were very helpful in understanding not only the phenomenon of intertextuality but also what literacy strategies the students were utilizing to help them to understand and make meaning with the text.

Analysis

I conducted analysis using constant comparative method to begin to understand the phenomenon being studied and to develop and refine further data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method of analysis was used in conjunction with Corbin and Strauss's (2008) coding process of open and axial, coupled with Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) selective coding. The initial open coding of round one data allowed for tentative categorization of the data by decontextualizing it or removing it from its embedded state within other less pertinent, tangential, or even nonrelated information. This process led to initial understandings and interpretations of the phenomenon being studied.

The round one data was then subsequently axial coded, allowing for the data to be reconceptualized within the context of the study to make connections between emerging categories. Analyses of round one data led to further questions that were subsequently coded through the same analysis model. The process of open and axial coding also helped to identify the dimensions of the phenomenon as well as its consequences and relationships with other phenomena, specifically traditional literacy and visual literacy. Selective coding further helped identify and refine primary themes of the study. These primary themes were intertextualities of traditional texts and image-based texts, how traditional literacy contributes to and detracts from the reading of images, how formal art instruction augments rudimentary visual literacy, and how a pedagogical approach that includes visual literacy/art instruction can aid in understanding, comprehending, and making meaning with visual texts.

Internal Validity

Shenton (2004) expanded on Guba's (1981) concept of credibility or internal validity to discuss the idea of achieving trustworthiness in qualitative research. Shenton posited that credibility is achieved if there is congruency between the study and the study's context. This study achieved congruency in the following ways. First, I possess "background, qualifications, and experience" with both comic books and ELA teaching because I have collected and read comics since 1986, and I was an ELA teacher for five years as well as a secondary ELA university supervisor (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). Second, I utilized different methods during the study to achieve triangulation, specifically observations that helped to confirm and augment interviews, as well as follow-up interviews with all participants that provided internal validity and credibility to this study. Prior research from multiple disciplines also aided in triangulation. Third, constant comparative analysis aided in internal validity because the data were analyzed during the study to check for consistencies, inconsistencies, and emerging categories. Fourth, I was able to confirm, clarify, or even disconfirm data collected with the participants through member-checking in the form of emails and follow-up interviews. Finally, the study was scrutinized by a dissertation committee comprised of five university faculty, two of whom specialize in research methodologies.

Results

The findings in this study suggest that the AP students' traditional literacy skills, which are considerable, are transferable to texts that are primarily visual. The students were able to effectively read, comprehend, discuss, and make meaning from images using their traditional literacy abilities. There are two primary factors that promoted this transference: the intertextuality or commonalities of the traditional phonetic texts and graphic novels, and the teacher's pedagogical approach with both types of texts in the classroom. I also found that students who had previous art/visual literacy training were able to articulate and discuss artistic elements related to narrative and thematic aspects in the graphic novels more richly, that is, they were able to discuss specific artistic elements such as shading, positioning, layout, and color choice while connecting them to the narrative and thematic element of the text. However, I also found that student participants who did not have any formal art instruction benefited from the teacher's direct instruction in art and visual literacy. Ultimately, I assert that while traditional literacy aids in reading, comprehending, and interpreting images, formal training in the arts and/or visual literacy may increase and refine a person's visual literacy.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the idea that all texts share common elements such as conventions, genres, structures, production elements, and rhetorical devices (Pailliotet, Semali, Rodenberg, Giles, & Macaul, 2000). For example, graphic novels use many of the same literary devices that novels do because each one at its core is a narrative (Carrier, 2000). Mr. Ryan acknowledged the intertextuality of these texts during the think-aloud portion of his interview.

> I'm reading the captions and looking at the pictures, not simultaneously, but sort of simultaneously like as I read the caption, I'm also looking at the picture and watching the emotion on the characters…then I'm watching like looking at the artwork and seeing how it goes along with what's being said.

During his think-aloud, Mr. Ryan noted the emotion of the characters—an aspect that is only shown, not written—as well as how the images interplay with the dialogue and captions. The elements he discussed served the purpose of setting the mood of anguish and tension and conveyed the theme of loss; however, the majority of this information came from the images. In a novel, these elements are typically conveyed through thick description and pacing of dialogue, yet in this excerpt they are achieved visually.

Interestingly, while Mr. Ryan is an experienced comic book reader, Thomas Hinkey, one of the students who read his first comic book in this class, was also able to articulate this process during the structured think-aloud portion of the first interview. He noted that the written text and images are "…working together because he's [Bruce Wayne] having this bad flashback and this television that's spitting out [saying] bad things is not helping at all. So they're working together but they're two completely different things." Thomas Hinkey recognized that the written text of news reports about recent increases in violence from the television that Bruce Wayne is watching is working to create tension, as revealed in the images of Bruce Wayne becoming more and more emotionally disturbed. The images serve to convey emotion and tensions, and their juxtaposition with the written text, as well as the pacing of the images as dictated by the paneling, are helping to create this tension.

Other students also recognized intertextuality during the structured think-aloud. They were able to point out and discuss literary elements, primarily symbolism, as conveyed through the images and the juxtaposition of the written text with these images. Three of the students discussed the imagery of Bruce Wayne's mother's pearl necklace being torn away by a robber and its subsequent falling apart. The pearls are drawn as three individual items separating from each other, and the students who discussed this aspect of the excerpt said it symbolized the loss of family:

> Throughout these couple of pages, it gets closer and closer up on the pearls. First the whole necklace, then just half of it, then really it almost zooms in on them, and it shows how they're separated. And I think that's an undoing or an untying kind of thing. It may be a part in his life where something comes undone. Where his parents die, so his family unit is kind of broken, so it's kind of like that string of pearls. And it's broken; he's the only one. I don't think he has a relative but I don't remember.

The pearl necklace discussion provides an excellent example of how symbolism can be conveyed just as effectively through visuals as through written text. Recognizing the intertextuality of texts is critical, because it suggests that literacy in one medium may complement literacy in others (Pailliotet et al., 2000). Another example of intertextuality appeared during the second round of observations when Mr. Ryan connected the character Beowulf to current times using Superman and Lex Luthor in Superman for All Seasons to compare and contrast the aspects of a hero:

> [Mr. Ryan] uses a lot of the literary elements that are in comic books and kind of discusses them in the same manner that he would if we were reading like another story such as Beowulf or just any other book that you typically read in English IV class. From Superman for all Seasons, it's kind of like—I guess I never really realized like the typical sort of like hero. I guess like a lot of the attributes that one would have, I didn't realize they were so obvious in a lot of works, but after reading Superman, he kind of taught us what the modern day version of a hero is.

It is evident from the study that intertextuality exists between graphic novels and more traditional texts, despite the fact that traditional texts utilize phonetic means to convey the narrative while comic books/graphic novels rely on images.

Visual Literacy

The absence of arts instruction and visual literacy instruction, not just in the ELA classroom but within K-12 education, is a persistent issue. This fact is nothing new; however, it is significant that four of the seven students in this study mentioned repeatedly how they had never been taught how to comprehend and interpret visuals, and all seven student participants noted that they had never been taught about images in their ELA classrooms. Carney and Levin (2002) admonished to study images alongside traditional phonetic texts, and I found that when this approach took place, students learned new skills that were related to their traditional literacy but also developed their visual literacy.

Michael Scott, a student participant, noted in his initial interview that "in graphic novels, the pictures and the panels kind of add something that you're able to infer and take something from the meaning of the pictures. So, that's one added skill that you don't get with a novel." He recognized that he was learning something new in his ELA class. In addition, he had previously received art instruction in his high school, so he was more comfortable articulating artistic choices and their purposes during the structured think-aloud.

It was evident in the study that students who had visual literacy instruction in art classes were able to speak more specifically about artistic elements, such as color choice, positioning, rendering, layout, size, placement, and combinations thereof; however, the four students who did not have this instruction were also able to understand and make meanings from the images:

> In the end when the bat comes in it's more of like a dark mood because he's angry with himself and angry at the world, so the bat kind of represents that darkness…. Color. Usually darker colors symbolize a darker mood. There's not a lot of background image, which shows you they're just trying to focus on the character itself. Like how it's a dark background.

I found that the student participants who did not have formal art instruction were able to rely on their traditional literacy skills when reading images, reaffirming assertions about intertextuality. However, and not to take away from this finding, they still lacked to varying degrees the ability to accurately articulate the artistic elements they were reading, and some needed modeling and scaffolding from the teacher, suggesting there is still a need for more formalized visual literacy training.

Visual Literacy Pedagogy

Mr. Ryan primarily taught visual literacy as the transference of traditional literacy skills. He then would augment traditional literacy skills by teaching skills specific to understanding images. For example, after handing out Daredevil: Born Again to his class, Mr. Ryan immediately began to discuss how to read it. He told the class that "you read it the same as a book, left to right, unless there are arrows indicating what path your eyes should follow." Mr. Ryan discussed the phonetic elements of the graphic novel rendered in captions and speech balloons and their relationship to dialogue in a traditional text. He also emphasized that only a portion of the narrative will be in these elements, and that the majority of the narrative and therefore their understanding of it would be found in the images individually as well as sequentially. Peeck (1993) had warned against simply stating "look at the pictures" because students will simply glance at them and not focus attention on them in order to understand and make meaning from them. Nevertheless, Mr. Ryan effectively said "look at the pictures" when he handed out the texts.

In an interview, Mr. Ryan explained that his "look at the pictures" attempt to connect the reading of a graphic novel to reading of a traditional text was a response to how scholarship on comic books has attempted to mystify the reading of them and has made the reading of them overly complicated. While I agree with Mr. Ryan's assertion, despite his initial attempt at instruction on how to read the graphic novel, a student told him the following day that he was lost and had "read the wrong boxes." This is understandable because even though the narrative of a comic book/graphic novel typically progresses visually from left to right, it does not always maintain this consistency. Furthermore, the images on the page being presented simultaneously can confound inexperienced readers because they become overwhelmed and distracted (Carrier, 2000).

Alternatively, the problem may be a consequence of the students' vast experience with traditional phonetic texts and little to no experience with comic books/graphic novels, which has predisposed them to ignore or only glance at the images without fully engaging the images (Pauwels, 2008). During his first interview, Mr. Ryan alluded to this issue when he mentioned that he had encountered this same problem of students not understanding how to read a comic book with past classes. He had determined that the students were not reading the images, but were instead glancing at them or even ignoring them, which supports scholarship that students engage with images passively and/or superficially. After the student had told him in class that he was still lost, Mr. Ryan revisited the issue of reading these texts. During my observation of a class, Mr. Ryan stressed that students must "divorce themselves from the idea that I read it because I read the words." As the unit progressed, Mr. Ryan began to instruct the class on symbolism and its presence in Daredevil: Born Again. He stressed that in order to understand and interpret the Daredevil text, the students needed to understand how symbolism functioned and was enacted within the text, and in order to do this the students needed to overcome their superficial understanding of the images and begin to read them. What follows is an in-depth example of instruction in visual literacy as enacted by Mr. Ryan that I witnessed during an observation.

One of the more compelling discussions of Daredevil: Born Again that occurred in the class centered around the character of Ben Urich, a reporter who had uncovered information on the criminal, The Kingpin, and the stress and anxiety of the character as he began to suffer threats on his life. (The following discussion references a panel on page 91 as well as other imagery in the Marvel Premiere Classics edition of Daredevil: Born Again.) In the panel, Ben Urich is centered in the foreground of the image. He is holding a telephone receiver, listening to someone being murdered on the other end, and has a look of desperate fear on his face. He is flanked by colleagues in the newsroom, two of whom are exchanging heated words, while others are going about their day. His boss is behind him, demanding to see him in his office. The words of the two men as well as the boss add a sense of urgency to the panel; however, it is the artist's choice of how to portray Ben that is compelling. Ben is colored all red save for thick black marks down his face and yellow eyes. Mr. Ryan discussed this coloring as a way to convey a sense of fear and alarm.

In this panel, the emotion of the character is not so much evident in the phonetic elements of the texts as it is in the visual elements. He is also less defined than the other people in the panel. Mr. Ryan discussed the artist's less-detailed rendering of the character here than earlier in the novel as serving the function of making Ben Urich seem small and weak. Another reason, though not mentioned by Mr. Ryan, is that a less detailed rendering of a character makes it easier for the reader to identify with that character (McCloud, 1993). It was evident during this class that the students, even those who had formal art instruction, had not been focusing on the images; therefore, they were missing aspects of the narrative and the themes in the graphic novel.

When Mr. Ryan formally taught visual literacy skills through the graphic novels, his students' ability to read images seemed to be improved, as deduced from the structured think-aloud activity with Batman: The Dark Knight Returns, in contrast with their classroom discussions about Daredevil: Born Again.

> I am better at understanding images; I need his [Mr. Ryan's] help though. I might be able to do better in this book, but like in Daredevil, if it wasn't for him explaining the images, I don't really think I would have caught on as fast.

The students were able to perform sophisticated image readings during the structured think-aloud activity by transferring the skills the teacher modeled and taught in the classroom to the new text used in the structured think-aloud activity.

Improvement was also evident upon the second visit to the classroom, when the students read Superman for all Seasons. In his second interview, Leroy Jenkins explicitly described the change that occurred for him between the first graphic novel the class read, Daredevil: Born Again, and the second one several weeks later:

> I think I am definitely better, because starting to read Superman for all Seasons I noticed I was picking up a lot more details in the pictures than I was in Daredevil: Born Again. If you're not paying attention to the images, you are going to miss aspects of the story completely, and I think they tell just as much of the story as the text does.

He felt that his ability to read, comprehend, and interpret the images in the graphic novel had substantially improved since the first unit at the beginning of the school year.

Discussion

Pauwels (2008) found that teachers hold false assumptions about students' abilities to read, comprehend, and make meaning of images. He found teachers often erroneously assumed students had the capacity to make meaning from images because students are engaged with them on a continuous basis. However, these teachers' assumptions were misguided, because the students often passively engaged with images they encountered and did not make any meanings from them save for the superficial. My finding—that the students in the AP ELA classroom during this study (and from previous years as revealed in interviews with Mr. Ryan) tended not to pay attention to the images as they read the graphic novels—supports Pauwels' claim. This was an issue that Mr. Ryan had to address and correct by formal instruction in the arts and visual literacy.

Peeck (1993) argued that visual literacy should be taught alongside traditional literacy, and this study confirmed that when a teacher does teach in this way, specifically focusing on artistic elements and choices, students are able to develop and augment other modes of literacy. Furthermore, those students who had previous formal art instruction via art classes possessed an edge to their counterparts in discussing the graphic novels because they had language for the concepts and conventions used to create the images. These findings suggest a need for formal visual literacy instruction, but even when such instruction is absent, students' reading, comprehending, and making meaning of image-oriented texts does not appear to be undermined, because they are able to rely on traditional literacy, at least when their traditional literacy is well developed.

This study also suggests that comic books/graphic novels are a promising medium for bolstering students' visual literacy because these texts utilize students' already established traditional literacy skills while simultaneously cultivating their fledgling visual literacy skills. Mr. Ryan had success with teaching visual literacy skills through this medium even though his methods were more ad hoc and picked up from years of teaching with comic books/graphic novels. Nevertheless, while students had something to gain from Mr. Ryan's teaching of art/visual literacy skills, Mr. Ryan himself may also be able to benefit from a more formalized foundation to his approach, which Callow (2003; 2008) may provide.

Callow (2003) provided guidelines for what visual literacy pedagogy might require. He claimed that students' explicit knowledge of phonetic texts must be extended to visual texts, for which students already demonstrate an intuitive or implicit understanding. He posited that teachers must provide students with a metalanguage so that they can develop a "more sophisticated and critical understanding" of how visual texts are created (para. 1). Callow argued that the metalanguage approach might allow for transference of traditional literacy skills to other literacies. Callow presented Kress and van Leewen's (1996) concept of "visual grammar" as a prototype for this metalanguage. This concept is related to Eisner's (2008) and Cohn's (2007) assertions that sequential images take on the characteristics of language. This study's findings, in keeping with Callow's assertions, suggest that teachers' assumptions about their students' visual literacy abilities are not unfounded but, rather, misplaced.

Callow (2008) extended visual literacy instruction to encompass students' affective and personal interpretations of texts, and he outlined a framework for assessing students' visual literacy called the "Show Me Framework" that included making visual literacy "part of an authentic learning experience" by "using authentic texts" (p. 619). Comic books and graphic novels qualify as authentic texts because they are relevant to the students' lives outside of the classroom. In this study, even though the students had very little to no experience with these texts, they still expressed excitement for them during the observations and interviews because they enjoyed the movies and television shows based on the characters they were reading in class. Interestingly, many students made references to the movies during class discussions. In light of this study's findings, I assert that using graphic novels in conjunction with Callow's (2003, 2008) pedagogical approach is an excellent starting point for teachers who wish to teach visual literacy.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of the study centered on issues of participation. It was difficult to find a teacher who could, because of his or her experience, permit insight into teaching with comic books/graphic novels without researcher intervention. Fortunately, the difficulty, and therefore the limitation, of locating a teacher who has had extensive experience with using these texts may become a thing of the past as graphic novels continue to be introduced into classrooms, not just for ELA but other subjects as well, and in college classrooms across the country. The small number of participants in this study also limited the accumulation of perspectives that could be documented. This study would benefit from participation by other ELA teachers and ELA students who are experiencing comic books/graphic novels in similar classroom contexts. This study may also have benefitted from potential contrasts and commonalities produced by the collection of data in classrooms not using these texts but having a similar advanced population.

Another limitation imposed on the study was the realities of time and place. Because the participants were hundreds of miles away, I was able to travel to them only twice, and for relatively brief amounts of time. While I feel like I got to know the participants and made every reasonable effort to collect data through various collection methods to circumvent the time and place issues, I also suspect that the data could have been richer had there been more contact. Nevertheless, this study has the potential, at the very least, to aid those teachers who wish to use these texts with this population of students, and perhaps the interview guides and structured think-aloud activity could serve as aids in action research as well.

Stake (1995) argued that case studies are by nature contextual; therefore, one could conclude they are limited or bound. Nevertheless, he also argued that case studies can be a beginning in that they help us gain insight into phenomena previously either unknown or not understood. As a beginning, this study produced some understandings of the phenomenon of intertextuality and what it may mean for literacies within the ELA classroom.

In closing, I must advocate that future research on comic books and graphic novels should not be so much about the texts themselves, but instead about what these texts, when used with this population, can teach us about much larger and ongoing concerns such as the primacy of traditional literacy and the resultant neglect of other modes of literacy as well as the arts within schooling. Avenues of future research, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method, should strive toward a better understanding of what students, advanced or otherwise, may be lacking when instruction only considers one mode of literacy.

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