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Voices from the Field

The Graphic Novel as Advanced Literacy Tool

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Over the first decade of the 21st century, comics have emerged as a strong literacy tool both in the official school curriculum and in the after school movement. For example, the New York City Comic Book Museum has a curriculum entitled C.O.M.I.C.S. Curriculum - "Challenging Objective Minds: an Instructional Comicbook Series," the first museum-approved educational program designed to bring comic books into the classroom.[1] Comics are particularly motivating for reluctant readers, and also for English Language Learners. Pictures provide a context, and the stories introduce students to all the elements of fiction discussed in a Language Arts classroom.[2] As vehicles for discussion, comics offer a gateway to more advanced works of literature discussed in middle school or high school.

In terms of the after school movement, comic book clubs have had a tremendous impact on students across the country. These clubs often have kids creating their own comics. Consequently, students move from passive consumers of texts to active producers of knowledge. As Michael Bitz writes, " Children are critically thinking about their roles in society and community by developing creative stories about themselves, their neighborhoods, and their identities as urban youths-what they experience, how they view themselves, how they interact with peers, and how they struggle with daily hardships."[3]

Graphic novels, extended, self-contained comic books, have evolved out of comics to offer the curriculum a new vehicle for teaching literacy and engaging reluctant readers. Stephen Weiner writes about the growth of the graphic novel and its value to the classroom in the Bold Books for Innovative Teaching section of the English Journal.[4] Weiner writes:

Well-done graphic novels offer teachers another tool to be used in the classroom and can enrich the students' experiences as a new way of imparting information, serving as transitions into more print intensive works, enticing reluctant readers into prose books and, in some cases, offering literary experiences that linger in the mind long after the book is finished (115).

In fact, I want to argue in this paper that graphic novels are not just transitions to more advanced prose works, but that graphic novels, in themselves, are comparable to the best prose works. Furthermore, graphic novels offer advanced literacy skills to a wide range of students, not just reluctant readers, but equally, regular and advanced placement students. Even more so, graphic novels now belong in the undergraduate college curriculum.

Graphic novels are also ideally situated to meet the core principles of media literacy education (www.namle.net/core-principles). In this paper, I will identify how a group of graphic novels address these core principles while also suggesting how the graphic novel can be used as an advanced literacy tool in the English or Language arts classroom.

Over a three year period, I surveyed my *Introduction to Literature* students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). RPI features a strong math, science and engineering program. Literature is a general education elective. Nonetheless, students approach literature with enthusiasm. At the conclusion of each term I asked students to rate the books they had read in class in order of interest and value to the class. Each term I offered a different graphic novel as the course's culminating reading. These texts ranged from Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and *Cancer Vixen* to *Maus* and *Persepolis*. Over the three year period, which would include 6 classes (approximately 160 students), 94% of the

students chose the graphic novel as their favorite text of the year. Based on student interest and the graphic novel's value as a discussion vehicle, I proposed, and now occasionally, teach a summer course called *The Graphic Novel*.

In what follows, I will outline some practical lessons for using a few terrific graphic novels in the classroom. My own course has demonstrated that an entire term can easily be filled by the graphic novel. Additionally, the extraordinary popularity of graphic novel adaptations for the film industry suggests the possibility of an entire course, or at least part of a course, on *Film and the Graphic Novel*. A few of the lessons below feature the film version of a graphic novel.

Maus: Active Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Art Spiegelman's two volume allegory of his father's survival of concentration camps has done more to promote the graphic novel than any other story.[5] This non fictional, part autobiography, part story of the father-son relationship, borders on different genres. Spiegelman uses postmodern narrative techniques to tell a historical, evidence-based story. The best way into this novel is to ask students a series of complex, open ended questions that will inevitably spur class discussion. The following five questions get at the heart of *Maus* as a graphic novel, holocaust survival memoir, and postmodern story.

1. In *The Art of the Comic Book*[6], Robert Harvey argues that the author's use of the cat and mouse allegory reinforces Nazi propaganda and stereotypes. Explain whether you agree or disagree with his argument.
2. Does the use a graphic novel format and cartoon drawings demean the holocaust? Briefly explain your answer.
3. What is a hero and who is the hero of Maus?
4. Explain an example of postmodernism in Maus.
5. How does author attempt to establish the authenticity of the story he tells?

These questions really get at the initial media literacy core principle: Media Literacy education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create. How are students to understand Spiegelman's allegorical figures? On one level, these animal figures appear to convey rac-

ist ideas and support Nazi propaganda. Such images could, potentially, adversely influence how a student perceives the text. Consequently, the text demands critical thinking as a skill necessary to deconstruct racial images and reassemble those animal images as complex symbols for Jewish resistance to Nazi stereotypes. Students need to exam their own bias and where that bias comes from.

In fact, students can investigate an entire belief system around the very genre of comic books and explore how *Maus* either reinforces beliefs about comics as limited, juvenile fictional forms or challenges the traditional definition of comics, and turns that definition on its head. For instance, the character Vladamir often practices racial stereotypes in the present, while simultaneously, his past self resists and transcends the stereotypes meant to reduce the Jewish mice.

Another series of short essay type questions forces students to investigate the complex relationship between the story's two volumes. The smash success of volume I presented Spiegelman with some unique challenges for volume II. The author's continual blurring of the past and present to create a complex contemporary narrative that allows students to explore how postmodern authors deal with history.

1. Art Spiegelman recounts a racist incident from his college days in "Getting in touch with my inner racist."[7]How does racism inform the writing of *Maus*?
2. Discuss the relationship between the past and the present in chapter 2 of *Maus II* "Auschwitz or Time Flies."
3. How does Artie's success from the publication of *Maus I* influence his writing of *Maus II*?
4. Discuss the relationship between image and text in any chapter from *Maus II*.
5. Describe what you learned about the holocaust from reading Maus and how the story affected what you learned.

The third question addresses the fifth core principle: Media Literacy recognizes that media are part of culture and function as agents of socialization. The second volume of *Maus* begins with the artist's struggle to come to grips with the success of the first volume. By the time of the second volume's publication, the first volume has achieved the status of media sensation. Has the author unwittingly contributed to the merchandizing of the holocaust? How does one

represent trauma? What happens when one profits off historical tragedy? These complicated ethical questions require students to engage *Maus* as a cultural product and agent of socialization. Ultimately, the text allows the teacher to pursue the question of historical representation. How do we read images inscribed within a historical tragedy. How does storytelling alter historical images and how the audience must process such images mediated as they are by popular culture? In understanding the effects of media on our understanding of history, *Maus* established a multilayered text for media literacy.

The Autobiography:
Media Literacy as Constructed Knowledge

Autobiography appears to be a predominant theme of graphic novels; from Alison Bechtel's highly literate *Fun Home*[8], to Ariel Schrag's[9] teenage chronicles, the autobiographical mode seems particularly well suited to graphic narratives. Autobiography addresses core principle number six: media literacy education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages. The autobiographical self constructs meaning as he or she traverses the story's terrain. This fictional self mirrors the reader's self, so students see reflections of the self's identity formation. The reader must negotiate the same developmental tasks as the protagonist. Consequently, these stories help students become aware of and reflect upon the meaning they make of the media's messages including how the meaning relates to their own life stage issues. In other words, the reader matures along with the protagonist on a parallel journey of self discovery.

A number of narratives focus on survival narratives, like Spiegelman's text. For instance, Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner's *Our Cancer Year*[10] or Marissa Accocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*[11] deal with the protagonists coping with cancer. Pekar's style reminds one of Zola in its naturalism, while Marchetto's vibrant color and New Yorker style is exhilarating in its telling of a serious story in a comic style. Her survival tale is in the mode of *Sex and the City* and appeals to students not just for its stylishness and wit, but equally for the documentary detail about the nature of breast cancer and its treatment. A good way to examine these stories is to have students examine the nature of autobiography itself. The following assignment applies to any of the above novels.

Marianne Hirsch outlines the characteristics of a bildungsroman in "The Novel of Formation as Genre"[12]:

a). A Bildungsroman is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society."

b). To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.

c). The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order.

d). Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society.

Assignment: Discuss one of the following Potential, *Our Cancer Year* or *Fun Home* as a bildungsroman.

In terms of public health, the following two lessons address the value of graphic novels as social documents and social aware teaching tools.

Reading	*My Cancer Year* by Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner
Guiding Question(s)	Do you know anyone who has suffered from cancer? How do you cope with a life threatening illness? How can you help someone who has cancer?
Level	High school and college
Assignment	Create a public serve announcement on the importance of cancer screening
Outcome	As a result of this assignment, students will be able discuss the warning signs, and preventive measures of the most common forms of cancer.
Extension activity	Create a board game on cancer awareness

Reading	*Cancer Vixen* by Marisa Acocella Marchetto
Guiding Question(s)	Why do people attend support groups? What do support groups do? Why do friends of people with an illness have support groups? Can you ever imagine going to a support group yourself? Do you have an informal support group?
Level	High school senior and college
Assignment	Break the class into small learning groups and, based on research they have done on various aspects of cancer and hold a 30 minute support group on cancer.
Outcome	As a result of this assignment students will be able to identify the symptoms and treatment of breast cancer in women
Extension activity	Create a fund raising activity for breast cancer research

These stories are ideal teaching tools for investigating public messages about illness and its effect on individuals. Students can examine socially constructed texts and trace the impact of these texts on the body of the stories' protagonists. How one understands cancer, for instance, is mediated through the public images inscribed on the bodies of the heroes and heroines. Each of these images needs to be interpreted and understood as a factor impacting the protagonists' understanding of self in relationship to society.

The Super Hero or Democracy Under Siege

One of the key features the graphic novel has adapted from comics has been the super hero story. From the Golden age of Comics in the 1930s to modern retellings and film adaptations, the super hero story remains powerful. One way to talk about the super hero is to give a lesson on the mythological hero. Using Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*[13] videos is one thought provoking and entertaining way into hero mythology. An ideal assignment, after watching the video, would be to go over the stages of the hero's journey and then draw a map of the journey. Students can then use the map to trace the journey of their favorite superhero (the following website from Berkeley has an excellent map of the hero's journey that can be used with the lesson: http://orias.berkeley.edu/hero/). I like to have students draw their own map and use icons from the story they choose to mark each stage of the hero's journey.

Retelling the super hero's story is a trademark of some great graphic novels. Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*[14] reinvents Batman for a new generation.

Reading	*Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller
Guiding Question(s)	What happens when a superhero ages? What would the world be like without traditional heroes? Is Batman a hero or an outlaw? Can an outlaw be a hero? Is vigilante justice ever warranted?
Level	High school and college
Assignment	Imagine Batman at 55. Write and deliver a speech in the persona of Batman at his retirement party.
Outcome	As a result of this assignment students will be able to define the characteristics of a hero and the hero's role in society.
Extension activity	Write an editorial to your student paper imaging a world without heroes.

In a fashion similar to Miller, Alan Moore's classic story *Watchmen*[15] questions the entire notion of super-heroes in a deconstructive take on the role of heroism in a post modern world of mutually assured destruction. I like to teach this very complex story using a version of Harry Daniels' *Literature Circles*.[16] Instead of passages, students cite panels. The new role of art director allows students to focus on how a graphic novels' art contributes to the story in some unique fashion.

Reading	*The Watchmen* by Alan Moore
Guiding Question(s)	What makes a hero? Are heroes culture bound? How have images of heroes changed over the decades? What is a superhero? Is a superhero like an old epic hero?
Level	AP English, college
Assignment	Break the class into literature circles and assign the following roles: 1. Biographer - how author's life may have impacted the text 2. Passage master - picks out significant group of panels 3. Connector - makes connections between the novel and life, i.e. the relevance of the novel 4. Discussion wizard - asks discussion questions about the work 5. Art identifier - identifies significant examples of art work taht contribute to the work in a way just words would not do service Present findings to the class.
Outcome	As a result of this assignment the students will be able to Do What?
Extension activity	Write a 1,500 word essay on how art contributes to the meaning of the novel.

A final great retelling of a popular story is Mark Millar's reimagining of superman. His story *Superman: The Red Son*[17] re-imagines the superman myth as if superman were born in the former Soviet Union. This strategy of retelling a foundational story from new perspective promotes students' critical thinking skills. Students are now able to imagine different possibilities arising out of a slight change in circumstances and imagine alternate histories. This critical practice allows them to consider different options when making a decision and also allows students the ability to rethink history.

Reading	*Superman: The Red Son* by Mark Millar
Guiding Question(s)	Is superman an American icon or a hero for all humanity? Does a change in social context imply a change in essence?
Level	High school and college
Assignment	Imagine Superman is born in modern day Iran. Draw a 4 page comic depicting a scene from Superman's rule as the new President of Iran.
Outcome	As a result of this assignment, students will be able create a comic book showing how the iconic image of Superman would change if superman were born in an Islamic country.
Extension activity	Draw a 12 page comic that imagines Superman be born just outside of Tehran. Show his rise to power in the Islamic republic and how his rule affects the world's balance of power.

These lessons on the super hero all address core principle number four: media literacy education develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society. Super heroes, a common feature of comics, often represent and defend democracy. That has been the super hero's role since 1939, but contemporary writers like the aforementioned Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Mark Millar all question the popularly received notion of the super hero as a democratic icon. The Comedian, for example, operates as an arm of questionable U.S. foreign policy. These writers turn flat iconic images into very nuanced, morally ambiguous characters. What happens to our ideas of democracy when the super hero, for instance, now stands as a leader of the U.S.S.R. What does an imaginative world without super heroes look like? The above novels all help students come to terms with the meaning of democracy and how democracy is achieved.

Film Adaptations or Multiple Literacies

Much of the popularity of graphic novels results from the frequency with which graphic novels are adaptable to film. The graphic novel provides the perfect medium for core principle number two: media literacy education expands the concept of literacy to include all forms of media. In a sense, you take a set of film stills, add text and you have graphic novel. The graphic novel is inherently cinematographic, and when adapted for film, the graphic novel is a rich visual medium. Reading texts and images requires a different set of skills. Students must read both print and non print text and interpret the relationship between the two.

Richard Mayer has discussed multimedia learning as a dual processing mode of understanding[18]. His ideas about multimedia learning apply to reading graphic novels as films.

There are numerous instances of graphic novels and their film versions including such powerful works as the *History of Violence*.[19] I have found the easiest and most productive way into a discussion of a graphic novel and its film adaptation is to have students complete a simple Venn diagram. They put the similarities of the novel and film into the intersecting circle and the differences in the outer circles. You then place the completed diagram on an overhead and you have the basis for a rich discussion on how film transforms and reinterprets a graphic novel. I have done this with *Ghost World*[20] and many other instances where the mediums overlap. You can also use the diagram to launch other extended activities such as the one below.

Reading	*Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes
Guiding Question(s)	Is the film version better than the novel? Why make a movie from a film? What is the difference between the two genres?
Level	AP English and college
Assignment	Write a 750 word essay describing how the role played by Seymour in the movie version of *Ghost World* changes the mood, plot, and theme of the graphic novel
Outcome	As a result of this assignment students will be able to explain how different kinds of media demand different kinds of events and characterization.
Extension activity	Write a new final chapter of the graphic novel imaging what happens to Rebecca.

My final lesson on *Sin City*[21] is the only one that may not be appropriate for a high school audience. On the other hand, a senior elective on Film Studies might very well have a field day with this highly sensuous and ultra violent postmodern film noir. What appeals to me about the film, aside from its extraordinary style, concerns the use of film noir. *Sin City* fits this genre perfectly and allows students a window into the 1940s and 1950s and classic film making.

Reading	*Sin City* by Frank Miller
Guiding Question(s)	Who are femme fatales? What is film noir? Are movies from the 1940s still relevant today?
Level	College; possibly senior elective with permission
Assignment	Review the material on Film Noir at Film-Site (http://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html) and write a 1,000 paper on Sin City as an example of Film Noir.
Outcome	As a result of this assignment students will be able to describe the characteristics of film noir.
Extension activity	Have students write a one scene film script for their own example of film noir.

In learning about film noir, students learn that what appears shockingly new often repeats the familiar but forgotten classics of western culture.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the graphic novel can be used in the English classroom. The graphic novel has emerged from its roots in comics to become a full-fledged literacy genre. Graphic novels motivate reluctant readers, engage powerful social issues, and present rich opportunities for multiple literacies. The combination of text and image addresses different learning styles and helps prepare students for the increasing prevalent form of multimedia learning necessitated by today's visual age. The graphic novel offers lessons in advanced literacy that engages students' critical thinking to the same degree as the classics traditionally taught in the classroom. Moreover, the intersection of the graphic novel and film provides for some rich interdisciplinary teaching.

As demonstrated above, the graphic novel is an ideal vehicle for teaching core principles of media literacy. In fact, the use of both print and image demand the use of multiple literacies in approaching the genre. Moreover, these multiple literacies demand the critical thinking skills indispensible to an informed citizen in today's global world.

Let me conclude with the thoughts of a recent student. I used the young adult novel *Life Sucks*[22] in an Introduction to Literature class. This graphic novel can easily be taught in the high school classroom and even, perhaps, with some modification, middle school. In fact, another advantage of graphic novels is their applicability to different age groups. *Life Sucks* by Jessica Abel capitalizes on the rich discourse in popular culture

around vampires. This popular phenomenon is another motivating factor in selecting graphic novels for the classroom. Anyway, as home work I asked students to comment on the theme, the importance of a selected passage, and the value of the art work. A student named Katharine responded in the following ways:

> One of the main themes of the graphic novel is the idea of the outsider. The humans whom Dave and Jerome encounter when they attend the fashion show consider themselves part of a counterculture, participating in the vampire culture because they feel as though they themselves are outsiders, but only Dave and the other vampires truly know what it means to be ostracized from society. Dave himself is an outsider among vampires, as he does not kill humans for food.

This comment captures the archetypal theme of the outsider and shows how students commenting on popular cultures can capture classic literary themes. The student goes on to address one of the novel's key passages.

> The panels on page 46 are especially important to the story because they mark the first real interaction between Dave and Rosa. Although they had already met when Rosa and her friends came to the Last Stop while Dave was working, Rosa's giving Dave a ride home to help him escape the sunlight marks their first encounter and the deepening of Dave's infatuation with her. The panels on page 186 are equally important. Dave has asked Radu to rescue Rosa from Wes and has resumed his duties at the Last Stop. In these panels Dave is interviewing a potential employee and the scene mirrors the panels in which Dave recounts how Radu turned him into a vampire. It serves to end the novel but also leave the story open, as it is the beginning of the new employee's life as a vampire.

Again, the student's perceptions ring true of classic literature just as they capture the deep structure of a popular graphic novel. The graphic novel begs for close reading of this kind, and a close reading combined with keen observation of artistic detail and the structural elements of a story. This type of reading necessarily extends the concept of literacy beyond print to include image and the discourse of popular culture. I continue to find student insight into fiction greatly enhanced by exposure to the graphic novels and I enthusiastically endorse this new genre for mandatory inclusion in senior level English or Introductory college literature

courses. Furthermore, the graphic novel is an exceptional tool for media literacy education. The form advances the core principles of media literacy education and expands the understanding of literacy to its limits. Hopefully, the practical lesson plans described in this paper one avenue for this exciting new literary form in the classroom.

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Notes
[1] Matt Brady, "New York City comic museum starts educational program, press release, October 29, 2002. http://forum.newsarama.com/archive/index.php/t-558.html
[2] One of the best articles on how to use graphic novels in the classroom concerns teaching English Language Learners: Christian W. Chun, "Critical Literacies and Graphic Novels for English-Language Learners: Teaching *Maus*," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 53, no. 2 (October 2009): 144-153.
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[4] Stephen Weiner, "Show Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom," *English Journal* 94, no.2 (November 2004): 114-117.
[5] Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2002) and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (St. Louis: Turtleback Books, 2002).
[6] Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1996).
[7] Art Spiegelman, "Getting in Touch with My Inner Racist." Mother Jones, September/October 1997, retrieved from http://motherjones.com/politics/1997/09/getting-touch-my-inner-racist, May 12, 2010.
[8] Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2007).
[9] Ariel Schrag, *Potential: The High School Comic Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* (New York: Touchstone Books, 2008).
[10] Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner, *Our Cancer Year* (New York: Running Press, 1994).
[11] Marisa Acocella Marchetto, *Cancer Vixen: A True Story* (New York: Pantheon: 2009).
[12] Marianne Hirsch, "The Novel of Formation as Genre:

Between Great Expectations and Lost Illusions," *Genre* 12, No. 3 (Fall 1979): 293-311.

[13] Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth* (Williston, Vt.:Mystic Fire Video, 1991).

[14] Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynne Varley, The Dark Knight Returns (New York: DC Comics, 2002).

[15] Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

[16] Harry Daniel, *Literature Circles* (Portland, ME.: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002).

[17] Mark Millar, *Superman: Red Son*. (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

[18] Richard Mayer, *Multi-Media Learning*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[19] John Wagner and Vince Locke, *A History of Violence* (New York: Vertigo, 2004). The film version was directed by David Cronenberg and released in 2005.

[20] Daniel Clowes, *Ghost World* (Seattle, WA.: Fantagraphics Books Special Edition, 2008). The film, directed by Terry Zwigoff, was released in 2001.

[21] Frank Miller and Robert Rodriquez. *Sin City* (Dimension Films, 2005).

[22] Jessica Abel, Gabriele Soria, and Warren Pleece, *Life Sucks* (New York: First Second Books, 2008).