Professional Resource:
Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom (2010)

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Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom. By Katie Monnin. Gainsville: Maupin House Publishing, 2010. 236 pp. $24.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-934338-40-7

As politics and regulation play increasingly central roles in high school curricula, the English teacher faces more time constraints in the teaching of literacy. ELA teachers are consistently encouraged by the state and school administration to encourage creative learning of literacy even with regulation. In *Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom*, Katie Monnin proposes the use and implementation of graphic novels to bolster all aspects of literacy in the English Language Arts classroom. Monnin explores the current ELA curriculum and the advice needed to include visual print storytelling to increase students' awareness and understanding of many types of literacy.

As an experienced professor of literacy at the University of South Florida, Monnin approaches this book with the attempt to increase the awareness of several new teaching styles facilitated by the visual arts. Her strengths come from her ability to increase student literacy while simultaneously training the teacher to understand how graphic novels can be utilized in ELA classrooms. This book incorporates previously published material on graphic novels and media literacy while organizing the information in a coherent, well laid-out textbook.

Monnin organizes the book into two major sections; chapter one ambitiously covers an introduction to graphic novels including historical information as well as terminology. Chapters two through six address different types of graphic novel literacy and advance through several different genres. In the introductory chapter, the book introduces to teachers unfamiliar with graphic novels a platform in which to proceed through the book. The appendices included in the text are pre-made handouts that make up half the book.

At times, chapter one seems to be a companion to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. A teacher unfamiliar with McCloud's work will find the references necessary, as the McCloud book was not written for pedagogical interpretation. Throughout chapter one, Monnin adapts McCloud's glossary of terms into an organized and well-charted breakdown and turns the novel reader into a graphic novel reader. She uses excerpts and examples from existing graphic novels such as Nick Abadzis' *Laika* and Hope Larson's *Chiggers* to teach the reader how to comprehend the graphic novel. Written in an approachable format with stylized fonts and cartoon shapes, Monnin strives to encourage ELA teachers new to the graphic novel medium to become comfortable with the content format.

After getting acclimated to the graphic novel vocabulary, she takes the reader into an in depth pedagogical understanding of the different modes of using graphic novels to teach. Monnin starts with reading comprehension, an important first step, and breaks comprehension into "three windows" which "allow readers to enter, inhale and comprehend the reading experience" (p. 15). In chapters two through six, the book is divided into Middle School ELA and High School ELA sections. As she progresses, she continually refers to Appendix handouts and guides the ELA teacher in the process of the assignments. Monnin stays consistent with NCTE Standards (ncte.org/standards), having the students "apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate and appreciate texts" including the use of context and graphics. ELA teachers have two major concerns in the definition of literacy: what literature is defined as valuable and whose literature is valuable (p. xix).

Figure 1. The Literate Eye reading strategy for high school ELA students.
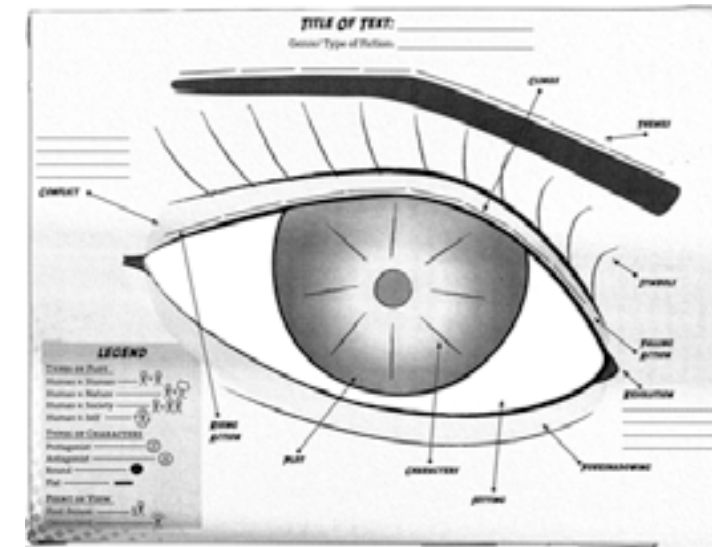
In the fiction and non-fiction chapters, Monnin uses "The Literate Eye" and the "Non-Fiction Collaboration" classroom strategies to increase knowledge of the elements of a graphic novel (see Figures 1 and 2) (p. 41 and 68). These strategies also teach literacy in novel reading and story comprehension and could be applied to other ELA lessons. The reader's understanding of the handout examples creates a comprehension of an alternative teaching model for literacy. Monnin also incorporates personal anecdotes to attract wary teachers to the positive results of her teaching, and readers gain an appreciation for graphic novels in the usage of the handouts. She also uses traditional literature to compare to graphic novels in order to let the reader understand the importance and necessity of "The Literate Eye" and "Collaboration" handouts.

Monnin's strengths in this book come from her ability to utilize the graphic novel to teach media literacy. The ELA classroom has been incorporating Media Literacy into its pedagogy since ELA no longer isolated print-text literacy as the only literacy worth teaching. She explains that the pedagogical connection between graphic novels and media literacy is natural (p. 103). Monnin breaks down this particular chapter similar to how she has structured the book as a whole. This chapter could stand alone as a new media literacy guide.

Figure 2. Non-fiction Collaboration Stair-Step for high school readers

Relying heavily on Renee Hobbs' *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English*, Monnin adds her own method to the media literacy pedagogy. Media literacy education is taught in at least 48 states in some vein and beyond the ELA curriculum, the NCTE has a strong position on teaching media literacy pedagogy. The standpoint the NCTE makes on media literacy is built on increasing media literacy through the message carried by media – the comprehension of construction of the message, the message intention and message analysis (2008).

Monnin wrote an excellent summation of the NCTE media literacy approach and pays particular attention to Hobbs' "Five Questions for Teaching Media Analysis." While noting that Hobbs' *Reading the Media* is based on screen media, Monnin makes the translation to graphic novels. Monnin asks the core question, "Why is the Graphic Novel considered media?" Citing David Buckingham's explanation that "media texts often combine several 'languages' or forms of communication – visual images (still or moving), audio (sound, music or speech), and written language" she explains that graphic novels are a hybrid medium that conform to Buckingham's definition (Buckingham 2003, 4). This chapter is more in depth than the previous chapters and openly asking the question many readers have: "How can students be better prepared to read media text?"

In chapter five, Monnin incorporates the previously defined graphic novel vernacular and redefines them in the context of media literacy. By creating charts to define elements of the graphic novel in the frame of media literacy, the reader gains teaching confidence in both subjects. The first of three parts of chapter five are designed for the reader's updated literacy rather than for teaching examples and Mon-

nin supports the training by reusing graphic novel panels from chapter one such as *Laika* and *Chiggers*.

Chapter five enhances Hobbs' Five Steps of Media Analysis as they apply to graphic novel terminology and critical reading partnerships (p. 110). Following the introductory segment, Monnin breaks down the Middle School and High School approaches of graphic novel media literacy and instead of the fill-in-the-blank worksheets from fiction and non-fiction graphic novels, she uses writing exercises to create student learning. The in-text example uses Art Speigelman's *Maus* to teach critical media literacy thinking. Her approach to media literacy is an adaption of pre-existing media literacy guidelines as well as her own pedagogy of the graphic novel and media understanding.

Lastly, Monnin spends chapter six suggesting techniques of teaching English to English language learners. While not an area or her expertise, she uses knowledgeable suggestions that would be in a traditional ELA classroom guideline.

While creating a strong useful text and utilizing Hobb's work, Monnin could have also incorporated the Center for Media Literacy's Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions in the CML MediaLit Kit. The Core Concepts can, in Monnin's terms, naturally be included in graphic novel pedagogy, especially the concept that "media messages are constructed using a creative language with their own rules" (2008). Another supportive argument Monnin could have utilized is the graphic novel's connection to film. The only reference to film is a literary reference about the adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. As a multiple media text, the graphic novel could have been applied more widely on a media literacy standpoint.

Monnin's strong suit is her ability to treat the reader as a student without preaching or patronizing. She approaches the book as an option in the classroom and how to enhance the option rather than a missing piece of pedagogy necessary to be added. Monnin sells the message to the ELA teacher when she says: "While the greatest communication revolution of all time is occurring, we must teach it in our classrooms. Because when they graduate, they will be expected to be competent readers of both print text and image literacies. The world has become a multi-modal literacy world that places value on both" (p. 118). As new media and multiple media become more embedded into the student mind, a guidebook like Katie Monnin's is well timed and necessary to add creativity and media literacy to the English Language Arts classroom.

References

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