

2016

Teaching "real books" versus graphic novels in the classroom

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Citation/Publisher Attribution

Kern, D. (2016). Teaching "real books" versus graphic novels in the classroom. *New England Reading Association Journal*, 51(1), 121-122.

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Review of Research in the Classroom

New England Reading Association Journal, April/May 2016

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Title: Teaching “Real Books” versus Graphic Novels in the Classroom

If a literary genre, such as graphic novels, is not going to be “on the test”, is there a place for them in the English language arts classroom? Are graphic novels better off used as supplementary “reading” or better yet, left for home reading? In this review of *Research in the Classroom*, we will examine the response to these questions from three diverse research studies. We will consider the advantages and hurdles teachers and students experience when reading and/or teaching graphic novels.

Connections between Graphic Novel and Film

The literature on teaching graphic novels reveals several promising practices and good reasons to include graphic novels in your classroom library and instructional repertoire. Dallacqua (2012) explored the connections between graphic novels and film in her qualitative study with four fifth grade students. They participated in books discussions and one-on-one interviews afterschool. They read *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang.

Dallacqua’s students shared several insights about their deep reading and comprehension of the graphic novels and similarities to understanding film. For example, students discussed color and shading to reveal the mood of the story and how it advances the plot. Another students described how “the mind movie” happened in his head, clearly demonstrating metacomprehension and active, rather than, reading. Dallacqua (2012) reminds teachers that close reading of a graphic novel requires skill and attention to detail, and asserts that, “visual media aren’t only legitimate but essential in preparing young adults to interact with their world outside of the classroom” (p. 69).

“Boy Books” and Nerds

Moeller (2011), a school library media specialist, conducted her research in a high school with fifteen students grades 9-12. They read three graphic novels—*X-23: Innocence Lost* by Craig Kyle; *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* by J.P. Stassen; and *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* by Bill Willingham—and participated in focus group discussions and individual interviews. Moeller’s primary research interests were how students perceived gender differences in graphic novel preference and what suggestions they had about how graphic novels could be used in school contexts.

Moeller found that adolescents of any gender enjoy reading graphic novels, but some students may be somewhat uneasy about reading graphic novels in school. For example, one male student shared his surprise that several female students

were in the reading group, “You just don’t expect girls to be into that whole thing as much as guys are. You know, video games, graphic novels, comic books and all that, the works of nerd culture, not saying that in an insulting way” (p. 480). Both male and female students also described how publicly reading a graphic novel might cause them to be scrutinized by popular groups of students.

Students shared several suggestions about use of graphic novels in school. One male student suggested that reading graphic novels in school should be mandatory for all students to stymie that stigma and embarrassment associated with choosing to read a graphic novel. On the other hand, several female students were more comfortable reading “real books” and thought that graphic novels should be used as supplemental reading material. Interestingly, Moeller initially met with resistance for her study from the assistant superintendent, “who expressed judgment that graphic novels in general were inappropriate material to be shared with teenagers because they depicted violence and sex” (pp. 481-482). Moeller saw this as further evidence that use of graphic novels in the classroom may be met with a need to help both students and adults understand that well-chosen graphic novels are a legitimate literary genre and are appropriate for school. She suggests that teachers and librarians use reputable book lists, such as *Great Graphic Novels for Teens* list. Perhaps the most important finding of this study was that all readers, regardless of gender, enjoyed graphic novels that included characters they can relate to.

Elementary Teachers’ Attitudes about Graphic Novels

Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher and Frey (2011/2012) conducted a survey of 60 elementary teachers to determine teachers’ openness regarding graphic novels and their openness to use them to teach literacy in their classrooms. They found that teachers are willing to use graphic novels but are need to learn more about effective instructional models and need more quality graphic novels in their classroom libraries. Furthermore, teachers need to work on their own level of comfort and familiarity with the genre to better meet the current-day literacy needs of their students.

Teachers reported that they did not grow up reading graphic novels, which makes the genre a challenge for them. They like how publishers are promoting graphic novels that align more closely with academic goals, which encouraged some to integrate these titles into lessons more often. Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher and Frey (2011/2012) note that public education policy, such as adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state and district testing, may constrain the use of graphic novels in the English language arts classroom.

Conclusion

Each research study reviewed in this column demonstrates that graphic novels have literary merit in the classroom. The rigor required to make inferences, analyze, synthesize meaning from a text that is primarily visual requires students to make connections, read closely, and visualize—all key aspects of the current-day English

language arts standards. Several research questions remain, though, especially those that provide guidance on how to effectively teach with quality graphic novels and how to overcome the perception that graphic novels are not “real books” or those relegated for the “other” or for afterschool reading.

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