

TO THE INSTRUCTION CAVE, LIBRARIAN! GRAPHIC NOVELS AND INFORMATION LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

Information literacy librarians have been known to trawl the waters of popular culture for phenomena that are capable of teaching information literacy skills and simultaneously engaging student interest. For these librarians, graphic novels have reached a point where they are too big to ignore.

DEFINITIONS

Definitions can be an issue when addressing graphic novels. No standard definition exists among scholars. This paper/presentation will focus on graphic novels, but will also draw on literature and theories specific to comics, of which graphic novels can be considered a sub-genre/sub-medium. McCloud (1993) defines comics as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 20). This broad definition, carefully articulated over the course of an entire chapter of *Understanding Comics*, is helpful for defining the larger medium that encapsulates graphic novels. Chute (2008) prefers the term “graphic narrative” over graphic novel, and points out that, “Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella – including Spiegelman’s World War II-focused *Maus*, which helped rocket the term into public consciousness – aren’t novels at all: they are rich works of nonfiction; hence my emphasis here on the broader term *narrative*” (p. 453). She defines graphic narrative as, “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (p. 453). For the sake of

simplicity, this paper will hijack Chute’s definition of graphic narrative, combine it with McCloud’s definition of comics, and apply the resulting amalgamation to graphic novels.

HISTORY TO TODAY

If we adhere to McCloud’s definition of comics, they have been around for quite a long time. The same can be said for graphic novels, although for not nearly as long. McCloud and others have already done the hard work of identifying the ancestors of comics and graphic novels, so please refer to such texts for more information. For the purposes of this paper, graphic novels could essentially have come into being in 1986. This year was a turning point for the medium and could be thought of as the year of the graphic novel. It heralded the release of the first volume of *Maus*, the entire run of *The Dark Knight Returns*, and the launch of *Watchmen*. Although Spiegelman began working on *Maus* in the 1970s and *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen* were still serial publications that had yet to be collected into single volumes, the emergence of these three titles, in book-length form, is largely responsible for the status of graphic novels today.

These titles were worthy of attention for varying reasons, but all were influential in elevating graphic novels to the position they hold today. *Maus* can be thought of as the title that established graphic novels as a medium capable of addressing weighty issues. Also, it received a great deal of critical praise and attention from the academic community. *The Dark Knight* was successful in terms of sales and its influence on popular culture. Along with *Watchmen*, this title demonstrated that superhero stories had finally matured beyond the level that most people associate with any story involving tights. *Watchmen*, in time, managed to be successful both as a popular culture phenomenon and as an object of critical praise.

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Since 1986, graphic novels have continued to grow in popularity. It is fair to say that there is something of a golden age of graphic novels occurring today, or one can think of graphic novels as having broken through and become established in mainstream culture. New titles are being produced at an incredible rate, and some publishers have made efforts to “re-discover” older titles for a new audience. Other examples that attest to the growing influence of graphic novels include: yearly award/recognition ceremonies (Eisner Awards & Harvey Awards), a core group of well-established publishers outside of the major comic presses who produce graphic novels almost exclusively, an increased American interest in international publications beyond the Japanese market, conventions, trade publications (most notably, *The Comics Journal*), and an army of websites created by devoted fans and amateur critics.

Of particular importance is the generally favorable reception by academia. There is a growing body of journal literature focused on comics and graphic novels, ranging from individual articles, to special issues, to entire journals (*ImageText* & *Mechademia*). There are some academic conferences, the University of Florida’s Conference on Comics being one example. Finally, there are college and university courses being taught on comics and/or graphic novels. While these courses are rarely offered every semester and are far from being included in graduation requirements, efforts are being made to educate others about the depth and possibilities inherent in the medium. Long-held prejudices about comics and graphic novels as lowbrow entertainment have been discarded by some. Graphic novels are certainly not immune to Sturgeon’s Law, so while there is still a great deal of trash out there, but the medium has produced works of undeniable impact and quality and there are those who have taken notice.

RELEVANCE TO INFORMATION LITERACY

A number of books and scholarly papers have been written about the potential applications of graphic novels in primary and secondary educational settings. In most cases, graphic novels are portrayed as a vehicle to establish good reading habits in students who are not interested in books, and are praised for their ability to present topics in a more accessible fashion than pure print materials. Publications devoted to applications of graphic novels in higher education are far fewer in number. No publications related to graphic novels and information literacy in higher education were located while researching this paper, but some literature related to graphic novels and information literacy in secondary education exists. Schwarz (2002, 2007) has written several articles about the use of graphic novels in secondary educational settings and has constructed strong arguments in favor of the inclusion of graphic novels into high school curriculums. Her work also includes some excellent example assignments that are easily adaptable to higher education situations. Schwarz’s articles focus on the role that graphic novels can play in developing media literacy, a term that is closely-aligned to information literacy (although she uses both terms), and their potential to help students become interested and engaged in social issues and to develop life-long learning skills. While it is a bit simplistic to suggest that

many of the benefits typically associated with graphic novels in primary/secondary education are probably also true for higher education, such an assertion seems relatively reasonable at the same time. No magic wand of intellectual transformation is passed over students once they enter college. Whether or not graphic novels can address issues in higher education as well as they do in other situations is a conversation for another day. The bottom line is that there is an opportunity to make the most of graphic novels in selected instructional settings, and there are a number of potential applications and information literacy learning outcomes that can be addressed through careful examination and serious study of the medium.

INFORMATION LITERACY ISSUES

Decoding Comics

Anyone can sit down and read a graphic novel, but to go beyond a surface reading, the ability to “decode” comics is an important skill. Decoding comics refers to a reader’s ability to recognize and interpret the conventions and mechanics commonly used in comics. Decoding comics can be thought of as a form of visual literacy, but one that is unique to the comic format. Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* is often referred to as one of the best books on the medium, and can be used as a textbook for teaching decoding to both instructors and students. There are other titles that address the skill--McCloud often refers to Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art*--but none of these are quite as accessible or fun to read. *Understanding Comics* is itself a graphic novel, and McCloud makes the most of his experience creating comics to provide readers with thoughtful examples that are themselves, comics. Decoding comics is a relatively narrowly focused skill without much applicability in other contexts, but it is an important skill for students to learn because it requires them to think critically and to remain conscious of the conventions used to create a text. Hopefully, by recognizing that certain conventions are necessary to create comics, students can draw upon that experience and begin to recognize and reconcile the conventions and mechanics at work in other media.

Visual Literacy

Visual literacy is a term that has come to refer to a variety of skills and approaches. In the case of graphic novels, visual literacy can be thought of as referring to any aspect of the process of reading and understanding the images within a graphic novel that is not specifically addressed by decoding. If decoding comics can be understood as the ability to navigate the mechanics and conventions of comics, then visual literacy can be thought of as the skill needed to interpret the content of the images themselves. Visual literacy refers to different skills in different contexts. In reference to graphic novels, choices made by the artist appear on the page as visual information, and the ability to extract meaning from that information is an important step towards achieving a deep understanding of a particular work.

Authority

Certain graphic novels have the potential to raise big questions regarding authority. The medium includes a handful of first-rate titles that straddle the area between fiction and non-fiction in a variety of genres including: comics journalism/reporting (*Palestine* and other works by Sacco), travelogue (*Pyongyang* and other works by Delisle), and memoir (*Persepolis* and many others). Such titles can be used to introduce and explore questions about what is real or not real, the role and influence of the author, subjectivity and bias, and the values of different types of information. Graphic novels provide opportunities for students to explore and hopefully come to terms with the differences between first-hand accounts, reportage, narrative non-fiction, and memoir. While these issues may seem to be relatively benign when discussed within the context of graphic novels, they are issues that students need to be aware of when dealing with other types of information.

Comparative Evaluation

Graphic novels provide a wealth of opportunities for comparative evaluation. Many graphic novels are based upon actual events, people, or experiences, and an increasing number of original titles have been used as source material for films. By examining multiple versions of a single text, students have the opportunity to explore the mechanics and conventions of different media and to evaluate the effect that alternative representations have upon the experience of the viewer.

Research

Graphic novels are researchable. They are candidates for research in and of themselves, as a medium, and sometimes as individual works. Beyond the texts themselves, as mentioned before, many titles are based on actual events and people, and such titles create even more research opportunities. A graphic novel-based research project can be used to introduce students to skills such as: search techniques, source selection, evaluation of scholarly versus popular sources, citation tracking, and researching background information.

Understanding Scholarly Communication

As mentioned above, comics and graphic novels have gained a measure of acceptance by academia and generated a fair amount of discourse. That being said, they are not yet a major area of study, and the amount of scholarly output devoted to the medium is manageable in comparison to more established subjects. The academic endeavors and publishing trends related to the study of comics and graphic novels can be used to educate students about the conventions of scholarly communication and the value of different types of information. Some particularly relevant topics to explore include: scholarly versus popular information, peer-reviewed versus non-peer reviewed articles, open-access journals, the importance of conferences and conference proceedings, the value of interviews, and the role played by listservs and other informal channels of communication.

OBSTACLES

Applicability

There are certainly disciplines that present more opportunities for using graphic novels than others. Trying to identify graphic novels with relevance to the hard sciences, business, economics, or music is not likely to be an easy, or even successful, undertaking. This is not a major issue, as the likelihood of being asked for such a title is about as remote as the possibility of locating one. Some graphic novels seem to be written with particular disciplines in mind, and it is often relatively easy to find titles that would be useful for classes in literature, art, anthropology, political science, sociology, history, journalism, communications, and many others.

Scope

Some may question whether or not teaching graphic novels falls under the purview of librarians. This is a relatively reasonable argument as few librarians could be considered subject specialists or authorities on graphic novels. While it is certainly true that the amount of scholarship devoted to the study of comics and graphic novels is already more than any one person could be expected to digest and teach in its entirety, the fundamental concepts and mechanics of interest to librarians who wish to use graphic novels as a vehicle for exploring information literacy are not so complex that they exist beyond the average librarian's ability to understand and explain. While there are courses on comics and graphic novels, they are still relatively rare. A vacancy currently exists that librarians are in a good position to fill, either through attempts to convince faculty members of the potential benefits that the inclusion of graphic novels can have on their courses, or by developing and teaching courses themselves. First year seminars, introductory writing courses, and required library skills/research courses are good places to start.

CONCLUSION

Graphic novels have the potential to expose students to important information literacy concepts in an accessible and engaging way. Graphic novels can be treated as an intellectual sandbox. They exist as a space for students to learn a variety of concepts, apply those concepts, share what they have learned, and receive feedback in an environment that is, hopefully, unthreatening and fun before they must venture out into a world of information and scholarly inquiry that rarely involves word balloons.

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