Enhancing Student Engagement: Graphic Novels in the High School English Curriculum

By: Samantha Reid

Stop for a moment and think about how much media has changed in recent years. Consider the evolution of multimodal media in everyday life, such as television, phones, advertisement billboards, technology in cars, and computers. Even books and newspapers are now readily available in digital formats. If these everyday items have evolved so far, why not shift our thinking to allow books to include graphics in the same way that graphics influence everything around us? You can look at a sign and understand the message the picture is conveying. So why not apply the same interpretation skills to books? Many students in high school struggle to read lengthy books, especially when the language is difficult to understand. When reading graphic novels, students are required to use critical thinking skills to interpret the images as well as the text that accompanies the images. These skills can help to strengthen students' comprehension of literature while using a medium that is less daunting than reading a 300-page book.

When children begin learning to read at a young age, they typically begin with picture books accompanied by words. Instead of shying away from picture books once children learn how to read fluently, graphic novels can allow readers to use the fundamental method that they began with, to read a story with both words and pictures in a more complex format. Upon completion of a study focused on "Older Children's Responses to Wordless Picturebooks: Making Connections," Lina Iordanaki argues that students excel when teachers give them opportunities such as "broadening their reading horizons and offering them opportunities to read and discuss wordless picturebooks" (508). Another important point Lina Iordanaki makes is that "by assuming that some illustrations are too simple to read, teachers or parents who share books with children… could be at the risk of limiting older children's reading experiences and depriving them of potentially thought-provoking stories" (508). By expanding rather than limiting students' exposure to graphics in novels, students can learn to make connections by using higher-level critical thinking skills in literature.

Many students in high school say that English is not their favorite subject. In a 2016 study of 10th to 12th grade students by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, when asked, "What would you say is your favorite subject in school?" only 10% of students selected English; science, art/music, math, and computers/technology all ranked higher than English. Often, it is the difficulty of the traditional literary canon assigned in the classroom that makes the course less desirable. Perhaps by modifying traditional high school English curriculums to utilize graphic novels, it may help to capture students' interests. Graphic novels may help to engage students in strengthening reading comprehension along with enhancing critical thinking skills. While graphic novels alone may be helpful to student engagement, when they are used alongside the traditional literary canon, graphic novels may help to make challenging pieces of literature more easily understood.

There are many reasons that graphic novels are sometimes met with skepticism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "graphic" can be defined as "the techniques of production and design involved in printing and publishing; graphic design: graphics" or "providing or conveying full, unexpurgated detail; expressly stated or represented; explicit, esp. in the depiction of sex or violence." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "graphic novels" as "a full-length (esp. science fiction or fantasy) story published as a book in comic-strip format." In an article about graphic novels, author and librarian Stephen Weiner suggests, "The term

graphic novel includes genre fiction, such as superhero and horror stories, as well as nonfiction and literary stories" (Gallo and Weiner 114). In recent years, graphic novels have gained popularity and credibility across many genres and are no longer limited to only fiction, though many people still think of them as comic books. However, graphic novels have expanded far beyond comic books; many texts of the traditional literary canon have been translated to graphic novel versions.

When considering graphic novels in the classroom, graphic novels alone may be a helpful way to gain students' interest in reading. I also believe that when teaching the traditional literary canon, it would be beneficial to incorporate graphic novel versions of the text. English education scholar Mark A. Pike argues that "studying pre-20th-century texts has been seen, from this study, to provide readers with valuable experiences that could not have been gained from later works" (367). Pike's study shows the importance of teaching students the classic literary canon in order to understand how the past has shaped the future. When referring to the traditional literary canon in the high school curriculum, I consider texts such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Crucible*, *The Odyssey*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Julius Caesar*. Each of the listed texts, as well as many more, are available in graphic novel formats. The variety of available translations makes it easy to match the texts that have already been planned in the curriculum. When you provide the graphic novel as a supplement to the traditional literary text, it may be less daunting to students. While the format of traditional texts has language that is often too difficult or lengthy for students, the graphic novel format enables students to engage with the same literature (Griffith 184).

Students are constantly surrounded by multiple modes both in and out of the classroom. In their book *Understanding Digital Literacies,* Rodney H. Jones and Christoph A. Hafner define multimodality as "the use of multiple semiotic modes, such as visual, aural, spoken and written modes, in a text" (197). When students read graphic novels, they are using the multimodal skills that they have developed in everyday life and applying them to literature. In the article "Expanding Literacies through Graphic Novels," English teacher Gretchen Schwarz says, "To read and interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering" (59). When combining the multimodality of everyday life with literature in the high school classroom, I believe that students would become more interested in literature when presented with modes with which they are more familiar.

Graphic novels, as a literary medium, are the epitome of this multimodality. It is important to consider the position that Katherine T. Butcher and M. Lee Manning present in an article about bringing graphic novels to the high school curriculum. They point out that "today's students have had a childhood filled with the rapid pace and visual stimulation of television and video games, and they therefore seek the same characteristics in their reading materials: a scaled-down approach featuring short narratives and graphic indicators" (67). By using texts that cater to the modes students are familiar with, teachers can help to engage students' interests within the traditional literary canon. Graphic novels have fewer words that convey the same message, which can be less overwhelming than being presented with a 300-page novel. Outside of the traditional canon genre, some graphic novels help to portray topics, such as illness, death, assault, and complicated relationships, in a way that is more universally relatable. The approachable format of graphic novels can make sensitive subjects easily accessible and less

stigmatic. While graphic novels discuss these sensitive topics, the authors have intentionally written in a manner that avoids downplaying the seriousness of the subjects.

Graphic novels allow readers to have a shared sense of community by providing a clear image for the setting, plot, characters, and other literary elements. When reading graphic novels, the reader becomes culturally aware of characteristics that may not have been previously imagined. This allows students to read the story as the author intended. When using graphic novels as a supplement, you can provide the graphic novel as a way to ensure that the class as a whole is able to have a shared experience. Of course, some will probably disagree on the grounds that having the illustrations provided can take away from a student using their imagination to develop the images based on the content. However, I believe that providing the images actually allows the student to delve into higher level critical thinking. When the images depict cultural factors, students can make connections that may not have been previously aware of.

Though the graphics can help enable a student to use critical thinking skills to make connections, a common skepticism of graphic novels questions the validity of the reading. Considering graphic novels have significantly fewer words than traditional novels, it raises concerns regarding comprehension of the textual content. Robin Moeller discusses this concern in her article published in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* "A Question of Legitimacy: Graphic Novel Reading as 'Real' Reading." Moeller conducted her own study to determine if her 6th grade students felt that graphic novels were a legitimate source of educational reading. The overall results of this independent study showed that these students found the graphic novels fun to read, but they did not comprehend as much as students that read the traditional book (Moeller 715). Although graphic novels have the same foundational elements as traditional novels, such as setting, plot, and characters, it seems that a lesson on comprehending graphic novels may need to be taught prior to students reading the graphic novel. When implementing graphic novels in the curriculum, teachers would need to first instruct students how to interpret graphic novels. Because the teacher is introducing a new way of interpreting literature to students, they would need to ensure that they are giving them all the tools they need to be successful. It would be beneficial to start by explaining the different vocabulary and concepts, as well as how to read the pictures rather than just looking at them. It would be necessary to take the time to read and discuss samples together before sending students on their own to navigate a graphic novel. By taking this step first, the teacher will help to ensure that students will be able to read the graphic novel the way the author intended for it to be read as well as fully understand the format. This idea leads to the further question of how we can help students learn to understand multiple literacy skills.

By utilizing new methods and incorporating graphic novels into the curriculum, we can help students to develop multiple literacy skills in the English classroom. Jones and Hafner say, "It should be obvious that making meaning has always involved more than just words… it is increasingly important for readers and writers to understand the logic of visual communication" (50). By using new media and staying current, educators can help students become more literate in multiple literacies. This idea expands beyond the English curriculum: we can incorporate graphic novels in the history, science, and math curriculum as well. The book, *Wham! Teaching With Graphic Novels Across the Curriculum* by William G. Brozo et al. is an anthology of teachers demonstrating how they have implemented teaching with graphic novels across the curriculum. In the preface of the book Brozo et al. emphasize that "graphic novels are an excellent medium to motivate today's youth to become independent learners and thinkers" (ix).

Regardless of the content area, finding ways to keep students engaged with the material and motivated to learn is a topic commonly discussed among educators.

Teachers have some agency when developing the curriculum for their courses. One commonality is that every state has a set of standards that have been put in place to act as goal points for learning. How the students achieve those goals through the course curriculum is up to the teacher. For example, one Pennsylvania State Standard for 9th and 10th grade English students is CC.1.2.9-10.L, which states that students must "read and comprehend literary non-fiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently" ("Standards"). This standard is clear, yet there are not specific rules the teacher must follow to attain this goal. The state standards act as a framework to guide the teacher when planning a curriculum for their students. This framework often gives the teacher the freedom to choose what materials are being taught in the individual classroom. When choosing materials for a unit, one common framework that most teachers subscribe to is Bloom's Taxonomy. According to Bloom, cognitive educational learning objectives should strive to develop students' higher order critical thinking skills. This ideology is often referred to as a pyramid with the lowest level, remembering, followed by understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and at the top, creating, which is considered to be the highest level of cognitive understanding (Armstrong). By incorporating graphic novels in the English curriculum, teachers are able to engage their students with materials that evoke higher order critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, there are some common constraints, such as limited funding and administrative censorship, that may dictate the materials being taught. However, it is necessary for teachers to update their materials while the world around us evolves continually. Teachers, administrators, and school boards need to have conversations about the importance of incorporating multimodal learning and the ways in which graphic novels can help in advancing students' critical thinking skills. By expanding the curriculum to meet the changing needs and interests of students, teachers can utilize new media to improve student engagement.

While student engagement is a positive aspect of bringing graphic novels into the curriculum, another very important aspect is that graphic novels can also help English Language Learners (ELL). By having more graphics and fewer words, ELL students can interpret the images without the language barrier that the traditional literary canon can sometimes bring. Phillip Crawford speaks on the significance of graphic novels and ELL students: "graphic novels can also help improve language and literacy development, including second language learners; the illustrations provide valuable contextual clues to the meaning of the written narrative" (26). In a recent ELL course I took, I learned that an important factor in student success is omitting flowery language and using more concise and meaningful words. By utilizing the condensed language of a graphic novel, an ELL student can focus on the important words. The student would also benefit from the ability to interpret the images rather than struggle to comprehend the complex language alone. When the shared sense of community is added to the ease of the language, graphic novels can help boast student success as well as provide a more inclusive experience.

When comparing a traditional text and a graphic novel version of the same work, there are many factors that can lead to student success. Fig. 1 below shows a page from the traditional version of *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare. Fig. 2 is a page that utilizes the traditional language in the graphic novel format. When compared side by side it is evident that the reader will still experience the traditional language of the play; however, the format of the graphic novel allows the reader to experience the story rather than reading alone. Considering Shakespeare's

intentions for this work, he wrote it to be acted out on a stage in front of an audience, not to be read alone silently. When reading the graphic novel, the student will be able to experience the play more similarly to what was originally intended. In the beginning of the traditional text there is a character list provided just as a character list is also included in the graphic novel. The graphic novel version provides the characters' image in addition to the name and relationship that are given in the traditional version.

Fig. 1. A page from the traditional *Romeo and Juliet* novel (Shakespeare)

Fig. 2. A page from the graphic novel version of *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare et al.)

Teachers can choose to implement graphic novels as a supplemental aide in various ways. To serve as an example, I have included a sample activity that can be utilized in any English course or modified for use in other subjects (see Appendix A). It is important to remember that the curriculum guide serves as a recipe that can be tweaked and modified to fit the needs of the teacher and students. The sample lesson plans show that the use of graphic novels does not take away from the content, rather, it enhances student comprehension and critical thinking. Students can use higher-order critical thinking skills to develop meaningful connections in literature. By using this framework that incorporates graphic novels, students can achieve the highest-level of cognitive understanding according to Bloom's Taxonomy.

By including graphic novels in the high school English curriculum, we can help teachers find new ways to reach and engage their students. By using their interests, teachers help students to become more comfortable with the traditional literary canon and expand their reading comprehension to include another multimodal format. As well as developing an understanding of the importance of literature, both traditional and evolving texts. By considering the validity of graphic novels, English scholars, alongside librarians, can expand and broaden knowledge of

reading to include graphic novels. Education scholars must advocate for the evolution of curriculum to reflect students' interests. Parents, teachers, and students have the potential to see better grades and deepened critical thinking skills with the incorporation of the graphic novel genre into the English curriculum. Advocating for the use of graphic novels in the classroom can help to forge the way to validating the importance that graphic novels contribute to strengthening multiple literacies.

Samantha Reid is an English and Secondary Education major from Greenville, PA.

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Appendix A

Sample Character Graphic Organizer

Directions: Fill out the chart to identify what we learn about Character 1 and Character 2 in the original text. Then read the same chapter in the graphic novel and fill out the chart with any additional information that you learn about the characters. How does the comic's interpretation add to or change our understanding of the characters and their development? Make sure to consider the speech, actions, and appearance of each character.

Character 1 Name		Character 2 Name	
Original	Graphic Novel	Original	Graphic Novel

Reflect on what details the comic emphasizes that the text does not. How does this enhance your overall understanding of the meaning of the book?