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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

BEYOND SUPER HEROES AND TALKING ANIMALS:  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN GRAPHIC NOVELS IN EDUCATION

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Learning Technologies

by

David Greenfield

December, 2017

Linda G. Polin, Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

David Greenfield

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

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Pepperdine University GSEP <i>Master of Arts in Educational Technology</i>	2007
University of Judaism <i>Bachelor of Arts in Jewish History (with honors)</i>	1996

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Consultant <i>Self Employed, Los Angeles. CA</i>	Present
Graduate Assistant for Special Projects <i>Emerson College, Los Angeles. CA</i>	2017
Instructional Technologist <i>Musicians Institute, Los Angeles. CA</i>	2014-2015
Instructional Technology Analyst <i>School of Film &amp; Television/College of Fine Arts Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles. CA</i>	2007-2011
New Media Coordinator <i>Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles. CA</i>	1998-2003

### SELECT PUBLICATIONS

2015

NMC Horizon Report: 2015 Museum Edition. Invited to editorial panel of experts.

2010

Old Theories and New Technologies: Employing geocaching to create authentic, meaningful and relevant learning experience. Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on Education.

Leadership Styles of Educational Non-Profit Institutions. Proceedings of the Hawaii International Conference on Education. With Blue, D., Schoepe, T.

2000

Contextual Links and Non-Linear Narrative. Museums and the Web.

## **SELECT PRESENTATIONS AND WORKSHOPS**

2016

Comics in the classroom Stan Lee's Comikaze- panel moderater.  
Diversity in comics. 2016 Long Beach Comic Con. Panel participant.

2014

Constructing Knowledge Through Agile Teaching and Learning. Moving the needle:  
Galvanizing change in our day schools. RAVSAK Jewish Day School Leadership Conference.

2013

Major mayhem or a marvelous match? An introduction to museums and MOOCs. Future  
Salon Los Angeles.

2012

STEM, STEAM, & Collaboration. Presentation, Pepperdine University OMET/MALT  
Alumni Conference.

2010

Art and Visualization: Bringing Innovation into the Classroom. EduSoCal'11. Panel  
moderator.

2009

Web 2.0: Create, Share, Learn. EDUCAUSE Western Regional Conference. Co-presented  
paper with D. Scozzaro.

2008

Creating Global Communities with Web 2.0. Workshop. PeaceJam Conference, Los Angeles.  
YouTube to MuseTube- Now that we have Web 2.0 tools, how do we use them? Museums and  
the Web conference. Montreal.

2002

Small Shop, Big Site. Museums and the Web, Boston, MA.

## **AWARDS & HONORS**

2007

WAVES

Award for Excellence. Society for Technical Communication

2006

Principal photography for Jewish Holiday Origami.

1988

Artist-in-Residence. Hilai Center for the Creative Arts Ma'alot Tarshiha, Israel.

## ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this study was to investigate, document, and understand the reasons that educators who use graphic novels in their classrooms choose to use them, rather than traditional text. Secondary goals were to identify the classes they teach, and to identify commonalities and shared best practices. Interviews were scheduled, to provide the with data about learning objectives, students' reactions, the books they use, types of assignments, the criteria that they use to define the critical elements for success in their classes, as well as the instructors' own relationships with graphic novels.

The phenomenological methodology was determined to be the most appropriate method to understand the teacher's experiences, and allowed the interview subjects to share and expound on their experiences, thoughts, feelings, images, and memories that described a baseline for the practice of using graphic novels in formal learning environment.

The findings of the study were interesting, but not completely conclusive. The primary reason for using comics and graphic novels is teach and promote visual literacy, an important, and a critical skill in contemporary society. Another commonality is high level of student engagement and in the material. Although there are similarities among the other findings, including the encouragement of a love of reading, they actually illustrate the lack of standards and best practices and are based upon the preferences and practices of each individual teacher. The lack of standards also is seen in the teachers approach to using the genre to teach social justice, which ranges from a direct approach to addressing the issue through appropriate titles and assignments, to a more subtle and nuanced one, where individual panels are used rather than a complete book.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

As a visual learner, this author has always been interested in the relationship between images and text, and comic books were a great source of entertainment as well as learning. Devouring super heroes such as Batman, was as engaging as reading illustrated classics, such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Moby Dick*, or *The Once and Future King*. Leaving childhood behind, the author also left the world of comic books as his sensibilities developed and grew more sophisticated than comic books could provide. In the mid-1980s, the author discovered that the comic books of his youth developed into increasingly sophisticated and intellectually challenging form- the graphic novel. Although there were still super heroes and talking animals, graphic novels now had more complex narratives, with more complicated characters who explored prescient issues such as the role of an individual in society, meditations on right and wrong, and social justice. Super heroes were no longer simple characters out to save the planet, or solve a crime. They were brooding characters, with complex psyches, who wrestled with the meaning of their actions while reflecting on whether they were benign or not, and if the consequences of their actions improved society or made it worse. The author discovered graphic novels, longer books that addressed current issues, such as racism, immigration, urban crime, war and other subjects. The stories were often historically accurate, and did not shy from complex issues. Graphic novels were comic books that had grown up, and were as educational and challenging as they were entertaining. For example, *I Saw It* tells the story of a young Japanese-American, stuck in Japan during WWII after visiting his family, and through a series of serendipitous events witnessed the bombings of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The early 1980s produced Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg*, a science fiction story set in the near future, is an engaging narrative about global politics (the USA is a large corporation,

Canada is a socialist republic and Brazil has taken over all of South America), shifting economies, AI and robots, genetic mutations, virtual entertainment and even a talking cat working for the police. Comparing *American Flagg* to the current technological and global politics, one cannot help but compare it to the prophetic writings of HG Wells, or Isaac Asimov, except with pictures. Even a title as surreal as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* examined the consequences of genetic mutation, illegal drugs and urban crime. These and similar titles turned the genre on its head and challenged readers to look beyond the traditional expectations of fun entertainment in a comic book, and to examine the contemporary and real world that surrounds them.

During this period the author experienced a near epiphany when he discovered *Maus*, Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel about his family's experience during the Holocaust. Originally released as an insert in the oversized experimental graphic publication, *RAW*, Spiegelman told his own story of interviewing his father to learn about his father's experiences, but used talking animals (again) instead of people. The Jews are represented as mice, the Poles as pigs, the Germans as cats, the Americans as dogs. For many years before this discovery, the author learned about the holocaust through histories, memoirs in books, classes, and museums, as well as listening to the stories of survivors in our community. Yet, nothing could have prepared him for the emotional and psychological impact of *Maus*. It was a radical way of telling history, evocative of Plato's allegory of the cave, where truth is found by looking at its shadow, rather than directly at it. This was that story, taking a skewed but authentic look and expressing the horrors of that terrible time. As a visual thinker, a lover of the printed word, and a passionate social activist, encountering this new genre had a profound impact on this author, and he began to seek out, read and acquire new titles, each more interesting than the previous. Like *Maus* or *I*

*Was There*, some books were serious meditations on the horrors of the past century. Other books were humorous, such as Greenberg's *The Vampire*, found their way into his personal collection. Each year, the popularity of graphic novels increases, and authors explore innovative ways to tell their stories. Some are very personal memoirs, such as *American Born Chinese*, others, like *The Pride of Baghdad* are surreal narratives about current events, such as this story, based on a true event during the Iraq war when a pride of lions escaped the Baghdad zoo, and ran around the city until they were killed by American forces, told from the viewpoint of the lions. These books are engaging and informative, and allow the reader to stop and explore complex images in individual panels or contemplate interesting dialogue, thereby creating a very different kind of experience than a movie, or book. It became apparent to the author that one of the most important and unique attributes of graphic novels is that their point of view more than often describes intimate, human experiences (even lions in *The Pride of Baghdad* share this sensibility). When school textbooks describe historical events, they do so in a sterile, linear manner, often outside of how human beings have experienced these events. Movies can describe similar events, but in a manner that prevents the viewer from being able to stop and reflect on the story, events and characters. Additionally, because of the size, special effects, music and sound effects, the story become a spectacle, with oversized heroes, and villains, and often disconnected from the intimacy of human experience found in graphic novels. In the graphic novel, the reader can stop, reflect, and move around the story, returning to earlier parts to explore story elements that may have been missed. It is these attributes that make *Maus* such powerful book, because the sheer scale of the holocaust can be so overwhelming that the narratives of the individual people, who survived, are often lost to readers.

Over time, the author's collection grew, especially the sub-genre of Jewish graphic novels. These books explored the Jewish experience throughout time and place. There are talking animals such as the gabby cat in *The Rabbi's Cat*, by Joann Sfar (2005), where the main character, a cat, engages with his owner, an Algerian rabbi in deep, theological and philosophical discussions about the nature of man, God and community. Super heroes also exist in this genre, such as Ben Grimm, AKA the Thing in the series *The Fantastic Four*. At one point, Grimm discovers that he was adopted and raised by an old Jewish man. With this discovery, comes the desire to have a Bar Mitzvah, the coming of age ritual that Jews celebrate at age 13. But Thing is older than that and goes through with it, celebrating with a large community of his superhero friends and peers. Other books are meditations about the backstory of *Oliver Twist* and *Fagin the Jew* by Will Eisner, hidden Jews of Spanish descent living in New Mexico (*El Iluminado* by Ilan Stavans & Steve Sheinkin, 2012), and even *The Book of Genesis*, illustrated by the great counterculture authors and illustrators, Crumb and Alter (2009).

After years of collecting and reading, the author had the opportunity to teach *The Jewish Graphic Novel* as an honors class at Loyola Marymount University, perhaps one of first times that this class was offered in this country, particularly in a Jesuit university. As with most opportunities, there were also many challenges, such as deciding on the themes of the course and the books to illustrate them. Since most of his class was not Jewish, the author needed to be aware of quantity and quality of background information about Jewish history and customs to insure that the students understood the text and narrative of the books studied in class. Additionally, it was important to choose a selection of books that represented different time periods, as well as culture and communities. As this was the first time that the students studied graphic novels as a unique form of literature, it was also critical to introduce them to the formal

elements of graphic novels. Scott McCloud's (1994) excellent book, *Understanding Comics* was an obvious choice. McCloud provides a solid foundation of sequential storytelling that covers how traditional elements found in literature, such as theme, setting, time, characters, and told in the form of a graphic novel. In other words, using the form to teach the form. Other learning opportunities included assignments that used traditional literary analysis of stories, as well as longer essays. For the final project, the students created their own, short graphic novel, incorporating both the formal elements of McCloud, as well as selected themes that were discussed in class. To facilitate learning, the author used Blackboard, the Loyola Marymount University Learning Management System to give and collect assignments. Online discussions and blogs were assigned to give students additional opportunities to explore ideas and help each other.

Although the class syllabus was structured, the class meetings required a dynamic and flexible approach from the author. This insured that new terms, and concepts relevant to specific narratives were addressed in a timely manner, to insure student understanding. Sometimes these terms were specifically about Jewish culture, but other times they were much more global. For example, while discussing a story about Jewish migration across Europe, it became clear that the students were not familiar with the term "diaspora." Not to miss a teaching opportunity of this important phenomenon, a break from the planned lesson let us discuss the term, and what it means in history and current events by discussing the impact on countries and societies as large communities move from one location to another.

### **Statement of Purpose**

After teaching this class on multiple occasions, the author was impressed by the student's questions, as well as dismayed by the lack of awareness about current events and critical societal



issues. He began to search for new books about other cultures, communities, and current events, in order to develop a class on graphic novels and social justice. Specifically, the goal of the class is to see the manner in which graphic novels represent the impact of global conflicts on the human experience, ethnic migrations, and shifting identities of single individuals, as well as members of a community. It was this search that inspired this author to explore how graphic novels are and can be used in educational settings to explore critical issues in authentic, and dynamic ways that challenge and inspire learners of all ages.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

One of the most salient points Marshall McLuhan describes in his book, *The Medium is the Message* is the relationship between a story, the manner in which it is told, and the medium used to tell it. For example, listening to Orson Well's 1940 radio play *The War of the Worlds* was a very different experience to listeners than that of reading the book, or watching the movie. Understanding the particular media used to tell a story, its unique qualities and strengths, the history of how the specific media has developed over time, make a richer, deeper experience for both the creators and the users. This is particularly true with the genre of graphic novels, a fairly recent addition to narrative genres. The general consensus among fans and experts is that the form of graphic novel was introduced in 1978, and has since grown in popularity for fans, as well as becoming an important income generator for authors, artists, publishers, and even movie studios. We need only to look multiple, successful movie titles based on graphic novels, such as the so-called Marvel Universe to see their influence in Hollywood. This chapter presents a brief history of comic books and graphic novels in this country, a discussion about the definition social justice, in particular how it relates to graphic novels, as well as a list of several titles and how they are used in the classroom.

### Definitions

There are several terms and words that are used throughout this work that have multiple meanings. In order to assist the readers, a list of these words with the relevant descriptions is given below.

- Comic books are thin publications (usually about 32 pages) with narratives consisting of drawn images combined with text. Sometimes there is one story per issue, sometimes several. Many stories are episodic and told in monthly installments. Comic books are

usually produced for pure entertainment, with themes that are often about super-heroes, fantasy, science fiction, humor, teen-agers, and more. Social justice and identity issues are usually not associated with this genre, although there are exceptions.

- Diversity is about variety in a particular subject. In relation to this work, there are two conversations about diversity in comics and graphic novels currently taking place. The first is concerned with diversity among producers of comics- the writers, artists, publishers and others involved with making comics. This conversation is similar to others taking place in the wider entertainment industry, and is about the traditional role of white males in all aspects of production. And as in these other entertainment genres, there is a concerted effort to achieve an inclusiveness that matches the general population. The second conversation about diversity concerns the content and titles of comics and graphic novels. There is a relationship with the first conversation, especially for creators from different ethnic or gender communities making traditional comic books with super heroes, etc., this conversation focuses on the actual narratives and characters.
- Graphic novel is used to distinguish between works created as standalone stories, in contrast to collections or compilations of a story arc from a comic book series published in book form. Although there are many graphic novels featuring familiar super heroes such as Batman, the focus of this work is on the independent, standalone stories about specific events, people or communities.
- Sequential novels or sequential art are simply additional terms used to describe comics and graphic novels.
- Social justice is a term that has a narrow definition. As the author began researching this paper, he used a pretty limited definition taken from dictionary.com, which states that



1.49 in

social justice is a noun and is “the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society” (“Social justice,” n.d.). But, as the research progressed, he felt that this definition was woefully inadequate, and did not fully reflect a current, broader and more dynamic definition of the term. *Wikipedia* describes social justice as:

the fair and just relation between the individual and society. This is measured by the explicit and tacit terms for the distribution of wealth, opportunities for personal activity and social privileges.

In Western as well as in older Asian cultures, the concept of social justice has often referred to the process of ensuring that individuals fulfill their societal roles and receive what was their due from society. In the current global grassroots movements for social justice, the emphasis has been on the breaking of barriers for social mobility, the creation of safety nets and economic justice.

For the purposes of this work, comics, graphic novels and sequential art or novels are interchangeable (the reasons are apparent in Chapter 4). Unless otherwise stated, diversity refers to the content of the stories, and social justice uses the *Wikipedia* definition, which shifts the term from the realm of a noun to that of a verb, describing an activist approach, closer to that of a change agent. This broader, more inclusive definition has opened up the genre for comic authors and artists to tell personal stories, but also to discuss historical events about that tell about some of the root causes of problems happening today.

### **A Brief History of Comic Books and Graphic Novels**

To understand the power of graphic novels it is necessary to first review the history, and understand that in general, graphic novels are not standard comic books, but rather are something

more sophisticated, complex and developed. The first modern comic book is considered to be *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck*, published in 1828, by Swiss caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer. Although some scholars say that this is an example of the first graphic novel, the late comic historian Markstein (2001) argued that,

the pictures carried relatively little of the narrative load and only a bare bones version of the story can be understood from the short captions alone, although the pictures did add a great deal to the humor. But it did tell a story in picture format, even if the story was a little on the thin side. (para. 4)

They proved to be immensely popular to the public and very lucrative for the publishers. Within a short period, the newspapers began to realize the profit potential and began to license and charge for use of their comics. At the same time, the publishers started to commission original content and stories for their new medium. Max Gaines is considered the father of the modern comic book (and coincidentally, was also the father of William Gaines, the original publisher of MAD magazine for 40 years).

The birthplace of the modern comic book was in Cleveland, Ohio in June 1938, when two twenty-year olds, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster introduced the character Superman to the world in *Action Comics #1*. The world is familiar with this Man of Steel, arriving on earth as a baby who is sent here by his parents to save him from the impending destruction of their home planet. What is often not mentioned is that this comic is based on the biblical story of Moses. After his parents sent the young Kal-El (future Superman) on a rocket to escape their collapsing planet, the infant crash-landed in an unnamed, rural American farm field. There, he is found and adopted by a farm's owners, a childless couple. They soon realize that he is indeed a very special child, possessing a range of super powers that he must learn to use. With the

assistance and guidance of his adopted parents, he acquires a sense of humanistic ethics and values and learns to use his for the benefit of all of humankind. This story remarkably mirrors the biblical story of Moses, who is placed in a small floating basket on the Nile River to escape the cruelty of the pharaoh. Found by the princess, he is adopted and raised by the royal family, until he discovers his true roots, and becomes a fierce advocate and fighter for the ancient Israelites.

Although *Action Comics* was a comic book, one can argue that it developed the foundation for the modern graphic novel by introducing the archetype of the comic book super hero, as well as the form. At that time, publishers realized that they had a hit on their hands, and continued to publish stories about Superman as a serial, following him from childhood, to his teenage years and adulthood. The legend continued to grow in popularity as well as in the media as the story was adapted to other media, including books, radio, TV, movies, games and more. One could say that this book also was the first example of what Henry Jenkins later described as trans-media. Now, 90 years later, the franchise is still humming along and continues to be adapted into new forms of media as they develop.

In 1978, forty years after the introduction of Superman, Will Eisner wrote *Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*, considered the first modern graphic novel. There are those who argue that the roots of the graphic novel can be traced to the 20,000 year old cave paintings in southern France, or even the younger hieroglyphs in Egypt (about 5-6,000 years old). But most scholars and fans recognize Eisner, as the author who defined the modern graphic novel as it currently exists, a longer comic book with a more elaborate topical narrative that addresses larger and more complex issues and stories. *Contract with God* explores the stories of refugees in a new land, looking at their dismal living conditions in a New York neighborhood, laden with

poverty, and crime. The characters explored existential, real-life issues about their lives and living situations than would be found in a regular comic book.

In general, most comic books are about superheroes, villains or humorous comic book characters. There are also those that take their stories from classical literature. For example, *Classics Illustrated* released comic book versions such literary classics as *Ivanhoe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby Dick*, *Hamlet*, and others. In contrast to superhero comic books, graphic novels often take a more serious role in examining serious issues than regular comic books. Christensen (2006) wrote that graphic novels are

nonfiction, full-length, sequential art that explore novels that explore the issues of race, social justice, global conflict, and war, with intelligence and often times humor. The visual component of graphic novels supports text comprehension, making the stories accessible to readers at all levels. (p. 227)

Graphic novels are often similar to novellas, but told in an extended comic book format. They are also described sequential art as “an art form that uses images deployed in sequence for graphic storytelling or to convey information” (Eisner, 1985, p. 6). Although their subjects are sometimes about traditional superhero and villains, they are more often written as full-length novels exploring serious issues with intelligence and humor. Some of the genres that exist in the world of graphic novels include myths, allegories and commentaries, inspired by tales from the bible, historical events, personal commentary and biographies.

This shift in subject matter is important because in contemporary society, visual culture plays an increasingly important role in education as well as entertainment; “literacy educators can profit from the use of graphic novels in the classroom, especially for young adults” (Daniels & Zelman as cited in Christiansen, 2006, p. 228). The book-length fiction or non-fiction story,

written in the form of a comic book can provide opportunities for students of all ages, in both formal (schools) and informal learning environments (museums) to learn while interacting with highly engaging, multimodal texts of numerous genres and subjects. Combining compelling text with engaging images, graphic novels tell stories about people, places and events that we are interested in and care about, “we can visualize in a narrative structure or chronological line that contains danger, conflicts, risks, or choices about real human values, morals, ethical, or political dimensions and ideas that reasonable people can debate, dispute, or disagree about” (Daniels & Zelman as cited by Christiansen, 2006, p. 228). For example, the Pulitzer award winning book *Maus* by Art Spiegelman is really an autobiography, told as an anthropomorphic story exploring Spiegelman’s family’s history in the holocaust, as well as his own difficult relationship with his father. Journalist and cartoonist Joe Sacco’s (1994) stories *Palestine*, and *Safe Area Gorazde* are hard-hitting and powerful journalistic narratives about the conflicts in Israel/Palestine, and Bosnia. In *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi (2003) tells the story of her experiences as a child in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Another personal historical narrative is Keiji Nakazawa’s (1982) powerful story *I Saw It: The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima*, about a young Japanese American, living in Japan who witnesses and escapes both atomic bombs in Hiroshima and then Nagasaki. Will Eisner (2005) addresses one of the most famous forgeries in history in his book *The Plot: The Secret story of Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which tells the history of the false story of Jewish control of global banking that was invented by the Czar in Russia to stir hatred and anti-Semitism there, and is still used by hate groups today.

Sometimes fantasy is used to tell stories that educate as well as entertain. For example, in the series *Love and Rockets*, the brothers Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez tell the stories the eccentric residents in the fictional small Mexican town named Palomar. Another example of this



genre is Joann Sfar's (2005) engaging tale *The Rabbi's Cat*, where an Algerian rabbi engages in deep, metaphysical discussions about the bible and complicated issues of Jewish law with his talking cat.

But this sensibility, and understanding about the power of comic books and graphic novels to address serious and important stories has not always been the case. Throughout the first decades of comic book, many people in government, education and journalism spoke and wrote about perceived connection between comics and juvenile delinquency. This idea especially gained traction in the early 1950s, where the “criticism leveled against comic books focused on their perceived aesthetic value—or lack thereof” (North as cited in Connors, 2010, p. 66). One of the first journalists to question the propriety of allowing adolescents to read comic books was Sterling North, a literary critic for the *Chicago Daily News*. In his May 8, 1940 editorial, *A National Disgrace* he rebuked comic books for being badly written and badly printed” (North as cited in Connors, 2010). He wrote that parents and teachers needed to be compelled to break the comic magazine, as he identified the antidote. It was necessary, North argued to insure that young readers had recourse to quality literature. “The classics,” he wrote, “are full of humor and adventure, plus good writing” (North as cited in Connors, 2010, p. 66).

Although North was specifically describing comic books, his comments could be applied to how graphic novels were (and sometimes still are) perceived by the general public. Critics and educators have written in the past that graphic novels and comics were no serious literature, worthy of formal study, or to examine critical issues. But there was not always a carte-blanche acceptance of these criticisms, as some fans and educators pushed back. For example, one early fan of comics described his appreciation of comics (and sometimes still are) as perceived by the general public, writing about comics that “It’s just strange how they can look at something that I

find so beautiful, and spit on it without giving a second thought” (Connors, 2010, p. 69). Some students often feel stigmatized by their appreciation of the form. This sense of disdain from their peers often manifests itself by creating obstacles for teachers who choose to incorporate graphic novels into their curriculum.

This perception about the quality of graphic novels used in school curriculum often drives teachers away from using, based on the notion that not all students will automatically accept graphic novels into their learning. The teachers who do use comics and graphic novels in their classes choose books that emulate classic forms of literature to provide academic, intellectual and personal skills that become increasingly self-evident to students as they study them. This leads them to begin to understand that this form of literature can promote equivalent levels of the “self-reflection, capacity to initiate social change, the advocacy of tolerance, and the ability to stimulate the imagination” (Connors, 2010, p. 67) that traditional literature provide. It is only after the students understand the quality of the books can teachers begin to introduce more contemporary, and cutting edge stories.

Despite the reservations and hesitancy of using comics and graphic novels in educational settings, there have been significant changes in the sensibilities and attitudes among teachers, administrators, parents, researchers and students alike. Some examples include:

- Major conferences such as Comic Con regularly have sessions about using comics in education (the author has participated as a panelist as well as a moderator);
- An upsurge in the number of schools that now offer classes and programs in sequential novels and comics. California College of the arts offers an MFA in comics, as well as Savannah College of Art and Design, Yale University, Carnegie Mellon, and others.

- Academic journals such as the Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, websites such as Graphic Medicine and Listservs such as the ComixScholars from the University of Florida, podcasts about comics, and The Comics Education Offensive recently launched by a group of teachers from the Midwest and East Coast dedicated to spreading the word about the educational potential of comics.
- Schools that specialize in different comics formats such as the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont focuses on independent publishers and graphic novels, or The Sequential Artists Workshop in Gainsborough which offers a one year, for-profit certificate program.
- Established schools, such as Stanford, Portland State University, and Emerson College's Graphic Novel Writing and Illustration Online Program.
- An increase of peer-reviewed scholarly articles about graphic novels.
- An increase of books published about graphic novels in journalism, teaching history, social justice and other academic subjects.

These examples show that previous generations' understanding and attitude towards comics and graphic novels is in the process of a radical transformation about their quality and usefulness in areas besides entertainment. It also highlights a willingness for these teachers to tap into different forms of popular media (such as computer games) to use in education. Although the reasons for this phenomenon are not part of this study, a cursory review of some of the observable causes helps to describe this new sensibility. For example, children who were raised with access to comics have entered the teaching profession and are including this familiar genre in their curriculum. Additionally, graphic novels and comics have developed a more sophisticated, and engaging approach to content and narrative than earlier comics. Many recent

graphic novels have narratives that share sensibilities with text-based memoirs about critical personal issues as well as historical events. It is also relevant to acknowledge the shift towards a more visual-oriented society, and its impact on learning, communication and society in general.

Along with graphic novels with narratives about history, events, or people, authors, artists and fans have also become increasingly interested in exploring and discussing the formal elements and Meta descriptions that define the media. A sub-genre of graphic novels has cropped up that is self-referential, addresses the formal elements of graphic narrative, and is presented in the graphic novel format. These books are not written as a do-it-yourself-make-a-comic, but rather are philosophical, metaphysical and aesthetic analysis about the form. Two of the best examples are *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (1994), and *Unflattening* by Dr. Nick Sousanis (2015), which also happens to be the first doctoral dissertation written in the form of a graphic novel.

At first glance, *Understanding Comics* resembles a standard black and white graphic novel, with a main character (the author), journeying through a strange land filled with a multitude of characters and backgrounds that flow from straight representation to surreal. But as one starts to read the text, it becomes apparent that this book is deeper than it seems. McCloud (1994) uses the actual form of comics and graphic novels to explain the elements of a graphic novel, such as the panels, the manner in which characters and text are illustrated. He also explains the deeper meanings of how these stories represent time, place, and movement in a manner that resonates with college-level art history and art criticism courses.

On the other hand, *Unflattening* is a more philosophical and metaphysical and investigates the very basic relationship between graphic marks, text, and their cognitive and

narrative meanings. Both books push the boundaries of graphic novels in the way that they explore structure and meanings of the form of sequential art.

### **Graphic Novels in Education and Education Theory**

There is a difference between acknowledging (or, better yet, appropriating) a form of text and putting it to work in the classroom, and embracing it as a worthwhile form of reading material in its own right. At the current time, anecdotal evidence suggests that many educators continue to remain skeptical of the graphic novel's literary merit. For example, Chute (2008) points to the negative reaction many in the academy have to the notion of 'literary' comics as objects of inquiry" (p. 460).

One of the primary differences between comic books and graphic novels is that the level and style of the content is directed more towards post primary school readers, "graphic novels are popular with teens, using a few well-chosen ones in the classroom to initiate conversations about racism, social justice, war, and global conflict is an intriguing possibility" (Christensen, 2006, p. 227). Christensen also cited Francisca Goldsmith's comments at the American Library Association's 2002 Teen Read Week,

The sequential art within a graphic novel tells germane aspects of the narrative that the words do not. The reader is called upon to understand what is happening in and between the sequences of images (the panels of a graphic novel), as well as have access to the verbal text . . . The ability to read images that portray character, mood, and tone must be developed through experience. (Christensen, 2006, p. 227)

Sequential art also helps "readers who may not naturally see and experience what they read, whether because of operative reading difficulties or because of limited language proficiency" (Wilhem as cited in Christensen, 2006, p. 227). Christensen argues that graphic

novels allow immigrants and refugees from the war-torn countries, many of whom are learning English as a second language, to take part in classroom discussions and contribute their unique experiences and insights.

Educators need not worry that graphic novels discourage text reading. This reflects the findings of Lavin (1998), who suggested that reading graphic novels might require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone. Some English teachers use graphic novels to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue, using works like the Victorian murder novel *The Mystery of Mary Rogers* (Geary, 2001) as a bridge to other classics of that period.

Graphic novels offer subject matter students might otherwise never consider; they also help them imagine history. Raymond Briggs' account of his parent's lives in England, called *Ethel and Ernest* (1998), shows the changing look of England over 50 years and how common people reacted to major events like World War II. Likewise, Will Eisner's (1985) *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories* depicts daily life in a Bronx tenement during the 1930s in ways both humorous and touching (and sometimes with adult content). Graphic novel creators have even used the superhero story to examine social, political, and economic issues, such as in *Superman: Peace on Earth* (Ross & Dini, 1999), where Superman tackles world hunger.

When the New London Group, created the term called term multimodal meanings in 2000, it described the dynamic relationships between visual, spatial, and other meanings. The group characterized this relationships by describing two designs of meaning: (a) hybridity, or the crossing of conventional boundaries to create new cultural practices; and (b) intertextuality, describing the overlapping and interaction of multiple texts or voices comprising a text. When put into pedagogical practice, designs of meaning are necessarily situated in specific

sociocultural settings in which, “scaffolded by instruction, learners can develop critical understandings of the world around them” (New London Group as cited by Danzak, 2011, p. 28)

Multicultural students literally or symbolically represent border crossers, and are thus an embodiment of hybridity. This hybridity is expressed at numerous levels in English as a Second Language (ESL) bilingualism and bicultural practices, as well as through their innovative mixing and developing of new linguistic and cultural expressions. One interesting project, called *Graphic Journeys* is intertextual in nature, representing memories of shared experiences, family stories, and cultural meanings. Thus, they are stories of multiple voices that incorporate the expression of many narrators, both explicit and implicit.

Although there is little to no research available about the relationship between cognitive development and graphic novels, an argument can be made that it is possible to look at research on other, related forms of new interactive media, such as games to extrapolate meaning that can be applied to graphic novels. Scholars such as Sasha Barab of Arizona State University, Mimi Ito of University of California, Irvine, and Henry Jenkins of University of Southern California continue to investigate the impact of games, and transmedia in learning and education. These disciplines relate directly to graphic novels in many ways, including the methods that they engage, empower, and create narratives that place the users themselves at the center of their stories. For example, Barab, Gresalfi, Dodge, & Ingram-Goble (2010) wrote,

education is about revealing possibility and exciting passions, empowering learners with the disciplinary expertise to meaningfully act on problematic contexts in which applying disciplinary knowledge is important. Toward this end, we have been using gaming methodologies and technologies to design curricular dramas that position students as active change agents who use

knowledge to inquire into particular circumstances and, through their actions, transform the problematic situation into a known. (p. 1)

User-created graphic novels mirror this experience by placing the author at the center of the story through its creation. The author's choices, in narrative, composition and images all make the author an active change agent in exploring and telling their own story, or that of a community. Barab et al. (2010) makes an important point by building on educational theories that promote the use of narrative in learning, such as Rodger Schank's (1995) *Tell Me A Story*. It is critical to contextualize disciplinary understandings, specifically to narratize disciplines, concurrent with disciplinizing narratives, or in other words, to create a contextual link between a discipline (such as science), and the way narrative that describes it. Barab et al. (2010) describe this as a

disciplinary knowledge serves as one of the most valuable tools that one can enlist to act upon the world. Understanding the relations of pH to water quality, for example, can help one recognize the socio- scientific implications of a particular land use policy; likewise, understanding the literary power of simile and metaphor can help to establish oneself as having a compelling My Space homepage. (p. 2)

This is resonant with McLuhan's *The medium is the Message*, where McLuhan describes that each discreet communication medium, such as art, theater, television, or film has a unique way of telling a story. For example, *Star Wars* as a movie is a feast for the auditory and visual senses, and leave little to the imagination. But, *Star Wars* books tell a story that is made to stimulate individuals' imaginations to visualize their own characters, and special effects. In continuing this analogy, a graphic novel tells stories as only a graphic novel can. They promote



active participation of the reader in that they blend both text and images, demanding the reader to read and to interpret text and images. Barab and colleagues also address the power of creating stories, writing,

we have developed a theory around the power of transformational play.

Playing transformation- ally involves taking on the role of a protagonist

who must employ conceptual understandings to understand and,

ultimately, make choices that have the potential to transform a problematic

context. (Barab, Gresalfi, Dodge, & Ingram-Goble, 2012, p. 19)

They describe the choices that a student-author makes when telling their story, making the author the protagonist of the story, whether his own, or that of another. The author's choices in this exploration of identity becomes the central element of the story, no matter the kind of story.

About games, Barab et al. (2012) say that they “can be disciplinary worlds, and game play can become a way of disciplinizing the world, using disciplinary content as a tool to understand and take actions on problems in the world” (Roth; Hoyles, Noss, & Pozzi as cited in Barab et al., 2012, p. 19). This relates directly to creating and as well as reading graphic novels. Graphic novels situate the experience of the author or the reader “to establish prototypical situations as exemplars, which serve as the referent that, for the learner, makes visible and valuable the to- be-learned concept. Such work has resonance with simulations and other work designed to situate academic concepts” (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1991 as cited in Barab et al., 2012, p. 20),

but extends further in that we are concerned with situating contexts such that they are responsive to learner actions. In other words, while some have argued for the importance of the framing context in co-determining the meaning of particular content, games allow

us to additionally situate the person as the central protagonist who makes key decisions.

(Barab et al., 2012, p. 21)

It is possible to extrapolate that one of the goals of creating or reading a graphic novel, is to “support learners in perceiving themselves as people who can use the content toward meaningful ends with the expectation of allowing them to try on new ways of being in the world.” (Barab et al., 2012, p. 21). Graphic novels cannot replicate the active experience of game play, but they can give the reader a new and different perspective on how they are in the world. For example, gamers may read instructions on playing the game, but often ignore them and get right to play. It is up to educators and game designers then to write the manual and instructions, as well as design interactions and rules to help the player to learn how to play. But, in the end, it is up to the students who may or may not read the instructions before actually playing the game. In graphic novels, this choice is not an option (unless there are only images, such as *The Arrival*).

Additionally, the pace of most games (especially those designed for teens and older), does not present time for any kind of reflection. This is not the case in graphic novels, whether reading or actually making one, the learner has the ability to stop at any time to reflect and learn.

Popular perception of comics and graphic novels are often not considered serious, so it can be inferred that reading or creating graphic novels relates more to play than to serious learning. But, the renowned developmental psychologist Vygotsky (as cited in Barab et al., 2010) argued that “the influence of play on a child’s development is enormous ... [allowing him or her to act] a head above himself” (p. 19). “Through play the child is able to engage in forms of communication, in rule structures, in understandings, and even in identities that are unreachable in more explicit contexts” (Barab et al., 2010, p. 19) and “It is through play that a child can take

on identities and experiment with actions even before she appreciates the meanings associated with these actions” (Barab et al., 2010, p. 19).

Although the experience of reading a graphic novel can be considered a rich, interactive, and active experience, it is not as much as creating an illustrated, sequential novel in which the creator makes the decisions then observes the effects. Barab et al. (2010) provide a good analogy, writing,

it creates a potential for the player to leverage their understanding of a concept (content) to actually transform a storyline (context), this creating opportunities for one to reflect on one’s in-game identity (person) as the type of person who uses content to change. In other words, as game play unfolds, the narrative context evolves and changes based on the player’s efforts and decisions. (p. 20)

If we apply this analogy to creating a graphic novel instead of playing a game, we substitute player with author, and game play with writing and illustrating a story, we see that they both address active learning,

In 1949, Dewey and Bentley introduced an important concept that they described as the “transactional perspective to characterize the inseparable and mutually constitutive nature of subject and object” (Barab et al., 2012, p. 20). Transaction, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, is “a communicative action or activity involving two parties or things that reciprocally affects or influences each other” (“Transaction,” n.d.). It is also defined as the “adoption of an intention that is tightly coupled to, and helps to knowledgeably act upon, the environment or situation that allows for the dynamic (transactional) unity of individual, concept, and the environment” (Barab et al., 2010, p. 20). Gadamer (as cited in Barab et al., 2010) said,

play is serious, structured involves the suspension of belief vs. pretense, reality vs. unreality. We play games again and again, experiencing new paths with a palpable set of constraint. We play with ideas, piecing together seemingly useless sets of understanding, sometimes weaving our way into creative contributions. (p. 4)

Well-designed games offers something beyond the traditional simulation: they create a potential for a player to leverage their understanding of a concept (content) to actually transform the storyline (context) thus creating opportunities for one to reflect on one's in-game identity (person) as the type of person to change contexts. This does not always happen to the player, but it can happen to the authors and designers as they develop their stories.

### **Multiliteracies**

The term multiliteracies was coined by the New London Group, a group of ten academics who met at New London, New Hampshire, in the United States in September 1996 to examine how literacy pedagogy might address the rapid change in literacy due to globalization, technology and increasing cultural and social diversity. The result of this was *Pedagogy of Multiliteracies*, Cope and Kalantzis' 1996 book that introduces a

framework consisting to describe an individual change in literacy due to globalization, technology and increasing cultural and social diversity. The results continue to become more and more diverse and, consequently, have a responsibility to provide inclusive, multicultural and multilingual contexts that support critical pedagogy (New London Group as cited by Danzak, 2011, p. 28).


The term multiliteracies immediately shifts us from the dominant written text form to a more nuanced view that includes a variety of modes of communication and tools for meaning-making, describing ways that literacy is practiced in the new millennium. Multiliteracies

therefore refers to the idea that literacy is not limited to a codified, book and text-based pedagogy, but rather a dynamic understanding of models of literacy, such as comics, movies or other media. As a learning theory, this can be considered a practical way of applying Gardner's (2000) ideas pertaining to multiple intelligences. There are those who do not respond to text and reading, but can develop matching critical thinking skills as those who do, by reading topic-appropriate graphic novels. This idea relates directly to McLuhan's (1964) book, *The Medium is the Message*, as well as Henry Jenkins more recent work about transmedia. McLuhan suggests that every medium (books, movies, radio, etc.) has its own inherently unique, and strong qualities about how a story is told; each similar, yet different. For example, a story found in a book will be presented differently than that in a movie or radio show. Jenkins' theories regarding transmedia takes these two ideas and adds another layer of understanding. In this case, it is that every meta-story has many micro-stories, the backstories that provide important details or descriptions that are not included as part of the main story. For example, the movie *Star Wars* introduces the main characters and the primary story. And like all good meta-stories, there it also has many micro-stories, telling backstories that provide important details or descriptions not included in the main story, but helpful and sometimes important to adding depth and insight to the primary story.

There are two key premises the New London Group describes that are relevant to current, global educational and social context: "(a) the expanding variety of modes of communication and tools for meaning-making, including the mass media, multimedia, and electronic hypermedia; and (b) the growing importance of cultural and linguistic diversity as our communities become more globally connected" (New London Group as cited by Danzak, 2011, p. 28).

When used in school, students begin reading graphic novels during independent reading time in class, take them home to read, and trade volumes with their friends at school. These interactions serve as a basis for instructional conversations about the nature of comics and graphic novels, including the form, or visual/artistic style of the illustrations (e.g., drawings or photographs, black and white or color, realistic or cartoon), as well as the content/genre (e.g., personal narrative, fantasy, historical fiction, biography) of the various texts. Teachers and even librarians, support students by helping them envision and plan how their own graphic stories would take shape, support such discussions. Sones characterized graphic novels as “vehicles with which heir own graphic stories of the school in the improvement of reading, language development, or acquisition of information” (Sones as cited by Connors, 2010, p. 67) and it is possible “to build on students interests’ and use comic books constructively as stepping stones to a lasting interest in good literature” (Sones as cited by Connors, 2010, p. 66).

There are many benefits to using graphic novels in education. For example, Connors (2010) cited the following authors to describe the potential of graphic novels in a classroom, writing that graphic novels can:

- Scaffold students for whom reading and writing are difficult (~~Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002~~);
- Foster visual literacy (Frey & Fisher, 2004); 
- Support English language learners (~~Ranker, 2007~~);
- Motivate English language learners (~~Ranker, 2007~~);
- Provide a stepping-stone that leads students to transact with more traditional (and presumably more valuable) forms of literature. (~~pp. 1-2~~)

Additionally, student authors can use graphic novels for studying a wide range of topics, including: journalism, history, sociology, literature, the arts and more. These novels are not replacement of traditional text, but a different way to reach out to a wider variety of learners, such as visual thinkers. Through the interconnection of text and images, and sequential or non-linear stories, graphic novels promote critical thinking. The results are stories well suited for the visual learner with rich, detailed images as well as engaging narratives, for all people to understand, enjoy and learn from.

In *The Best of Both Worlds: Rethinking the Literary Merit of Graphic Novels*, Connors argues that parents and educators paid relatively little attention to the comic book when Superman made his debut in *Action Comics* in 1938. Yet, within two years, the commercial success the character experienced, coupled with the legion of imitators he spawned, made it difficult for them not to do so any longer. He observed that from 1938 to 1940, the number of comic books, published in the United States grew from 150 to approximately 700 (Connors, 2010, p. 34).

### **Contemporary Literature About Graphic Novels**

Since the late 1980s (but especially over the past 10 years) there has been an increase in the number of books written about comics and graphic novels. Some are written for the general comic-loving public, the equivalent of coffee-table books, while others are of a more scholarly nature and are directed to academics and educators. When viewed all together, it is possible for serious scholars and interested amateurs to gain an understanding of the media, the genres in a manner similar to other arts scholarship. Additionally, and more important to this paper is that these books help contextualize titles within the genre, interpret meaning and situate them within the context of education and classes. These books not only inform and educate, they excite and

encourage the study of graphic novels, and inspire educators to do more. For example, the dedication quote in Joseph Witek's (1989) *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar* states that, "Truth is stranger and a thousand times more thrilling than fiction" (p. i). Explaining his reason for writing this book, Witek (1989) says,

when a growing number of contemporary American comic books are being written as literature aimed at a general readership of adults and concerned, not with the traditionally escapist themes of comics, but with issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burdens of guilt and suffering passed on within families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world. (p. 3)

In making this point, Witek (1989) writes that the reason that he selected these three authors is that "they have all contributed to a vial body of work that has broken away from traditional comic-book formulas while exploiting the rich, formal, and thematic heritage of the medium" (p. 4). Continuing on this theme, he states, "the comic book, a widely accessible and commercially available medium, is now being chosen a form by serious writers whose themes have traditionally been expresses in the forms of verbal narratives (both literary and historiographical)" (Witek, 1989, p. 6). He concludes by writing

a general reading audience now exists in the United States for narratives written in a medium, which has historically been considered solely the domain of sub-literate adolescent fantasies of the crassest commercial exploitation of rote generic formulas. Comic art is thus a literary medium in transition from mas popularity and cultural distain to a new respectability as a means of expression and communication, and this new respect is evident first in the attitudes of the creators themselves. (Witek, 1989, p. 6)



This attitude of the creators has found its way to scholars and academics, influencing and inspiring them to consider comics and graphic novels in their curriculum. Two books about this intersection of comics in education are *Wham: Teaching Graphic Novels Across the Curriculum*, by professors William G. Brozo, Gary Moorman and Carla K. Meyer (2014), and *Building Literacy Connections: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, edited by James Bucky Carter (2007) are both excellent resources for identifying and integrating appropriate titles into curriculum, as well as providing suggestions about how to use them. The former functions as a primer to graphic novels for high school students, introducing teachers to the idea of using comics, and providing direction specifically for English and History teachers. The second book has chapters that compare classic fiction with modern comics. Some of the chapter titles include:

- Are there any Hester Prynnes in our world today? Pairing the Amazing True story of a Teenage Single Mom with *The Scarlet Letter*
- Abandon Every Fear, Ye that Enter: The X-Men Journey through *Dante's Inferno*
- Showing and Telling History through Family Stories in *Persepolis* and Young Adult Novels
- Visualizing Beowulf: Old English Gets Graphic.

These titles also show that teachers are as creative as the titles that they are teaching!

Some educators have also written about specific titles, and how they address big issues. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*, edited by Deborah R. Geis (2003), an Associate Professor of English at DePauw University in Indiana, is one of several books and many articles analyzing the groundbreaking *Maus*. The eight chapters of the book break down the story arc, contextualize it in the history of World War II, as

well as examine and discuss issues pertaining to being a survivor, stories and history, and the use of comics to describe the horrible events of World War II.

Two books the author used when teaching *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, that look at the subgenre from both a popular view as well as an academic one are *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, by Kaplan (2008), and *The Jewish Graphic Novel: A Critical Approach*, edited by Baskind and Omer-Sherman (2008), both are excellent resources for educators. The former takes a light approach to the material and is an excellent book for fans of the genre. It also is an excellent history of the relationship and history of Jews and great comic books (*Superman*, *Batman*, etc.) in the United States, while the latter examines graphic novels that explore serious regarding the Jewish experience in America, in Europe before and after the Holocaust as well as other Jewish communities in the world. Although both of these books are written by males, a recent book, *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*, edited by Lightman (2014), is an example of looking at both issues of diversity in graphic novels. The various chapters are about the experience of Jewish women in creating their own stories, as well as the content of the stories themselves. In a personal communication describing her book, Sarah wrote,

I think the current trend of interest in comics is amazing. It's wonderful how many new books are coming out by authors, and all the new research as well. The more people involved in this field as researchers and artist the richer it becomes!

But my focus is not just contemporary artists, and *Graphic Details* is a book that celebrates women's contributions to comics since the 1960's. Many of the artists in the book have work that is very important, but has been overlooked, and is also is not easy to access,

My book has so many excellent quality reproductions of works to make it is easier for scholars to read, write and research comics by women from earlier generations. As a curator and editor I have also had this long-term reparative aspect in mind.

There are still so many un-discussed aspects of women's lives that come alive in comics. I love Diane Noomin's comic *Baby Talk* about her four miscarriages that was a key piece in the *Graphic Details* show and book. Women still feel shame and hardly discuss miscarriage, but it is so common. I hope that comics can support this conversation and change the emphasis away from shame and failure, which is what many women feel when it happens to them. (Sarah, personal communication, June 1, 2014)

It is important to note that other ethnic groups are also telling their stories about their stories. In the prologue for Frederick Luis Aldama's *Latinx Comic Book Storytelling: An Odessey by Interview* by, Ricardo Padilla, a professor at California State University, Fullerton describes how he introduced his own children to Comic Con, and while wandering the aisles looking at comics saying that they tugged at his shirt, asking, where are the comic book heroes that look like them? Where are the Aztec super heroes? Where are the Mayan princesses? Aldama explores this question and provides some answers with his interviews of 29 contemporary comic creators. It should be noted that there is a tradition to graphic storytelling in the Latin, and especially Mexican community. One needs only to look at the work of José Guadalupe Posada, whose political graphics and stories told about the corruption in his contemporary Mexico, and could rightly be described as stories about social justice. An example of Posada's work published in 1924 by Blas Vanegas Arroyo shows an original image by Posada combined with an image of a Ku Kus Klansman by an unknown artist.

But writing about these books is different from making them. In *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir and Nonfiction*, Duncan, Taylor, and Stoddard (2016) review stories that fall into these three categories, such as Joe Sacco's (1994) *Palestine*, Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future: A Graphic Memoir* and others. The editors also provide guidance, suggestions and ideas for curriculum and exercises to help students understand the structure of the genre and then to create their own, in a similar manner as print journalists. Creating comics helps address the growing awareness of the need to tell the stories about important and crucial issues facing society in a manner that is at once familiar and accessible, but without infantilizing them. This book shows students how to find stories, use nonfiction narrative techniques, and combine art to create dynamic, and engaging graphic novels.

One of the primary delights in comics and graphic novels is the freedom to surprise us. Author and artist Barry (2015), best known for her long time, autobiographical comics published in alternative comics. Her book, *Syllabus, Notes from an Accidental Professor* is a journal, syllabus and sketchbook documenting a series of writing workshops for non-writers called Writing the Unthinkable, that is best described by the publisher, *Drawn and Quarterly* (2015) as, the first book to make her innovative lesson plans and writing exercises available to the public for home or classroom use. Barry teaches a method of writing that focuses on the relationship between the hand, the brain, and spontaneous images, both written and visual. It has been embraced by people across North America— prison inmates, postal workers, university students, high-school teachers, and hairdressers— for opening pathways to creativity. (para. 1)

## Topics and Titles

There are many benefits to integrating graphic novels into school curriculum. For example, they introduce readers to different forms of literature; help immigrants and new arrivals to decode print as well as facial and body expressions; assist in understanding symbolic meanings of certain images and postures; and illustrate allegories of modern life. Yet, there are two common threads that bind together a surprising amount of graphic novels- identity and history. It is possible to see this when perusing the graphic novel section of a book store and seeing a large selection of books that address issues of personal and community history, along with personal and community identity, and an individual's standing, within a specific community.

Since the publication of *Maus* and *Persepolis*, there has been a plethora of graphic novels published that address current events and important issues, such as immigrants and refugees, war, gender equality, the Middle East, LGBT, race relations, anti-Semitism, prison reform, American history and more. Many of these books are geared towards high school students, because they are often in the form of a memoir, and are appropriate for college and university students. Although not the intent of the author to create a comprehensive list of current titles or reviews, the author feels that a select list of titles would be beneficial to this is available.

1. Immigrants and refugees: *Arab in America*, by El Rassi; *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), and *Level Up*, by Yang and Pham (2011); *The Jew of New York*, by Katchor (1998) all describe the experiences of new immigrants to this country, and their struggles in assimilating, learning about, and blending into a new and very foreign culture, while attempting to preserve their home culture and customs.

2. War: *War Brothers: The Graphic Novel*, by McKay and LaFrance (2013) is a powerful, second person memoir about the child soldiers in Uganda, who were drafted to fight for the warlord, Kony; *Terminal Lance: The White Donkey*, by Uriarte (2016), first person account of being a Marine in Afghanistan; *We Are on Our Own*, by Katin (2006) is her personal and harrowing story of fleeing and hiding from the Nazis in Europe, during WWII; *Pride of Baghdad*, by Vaughn and Henderson is a surreal tale of the Iraqi war, as told by a pride of lions who escaped from the Baghdad zoo, and wandered around the city in the midst of the Iraqi war (based on a true story), *Episodes from Auschwitz: Witold's Report*, by Galek & Klimek (2009), is the true story of a captain in the Polish army, who had himself captured by the Nazis in order to get sent to Auschwitz to find out and report on the horrors taking place there.
3. Gender equality: In classic comic books, there are many examples of women taking on the traditional roles of male super heroes, such as *Superwoman* (and *Supergirl*), *Batwoman*, *Wonder Woman*, and others. But graphic novels provide women authors to tell their own stories which are much more powerful than the fictional characters. Books such as *Persepolis* show the courage and resilience of the author in her journeys outside of Iran during the years of the revolution. *Qahera*, a web comic written by a teenage girl in Egypt is part autobiography and part fantasy, and describes her struggle and fight to be an independent and strong Muslim woman. Also, The Hernandez brothers long running series, *Love and Rockets*, (which has been around since the early 1980s) has several main characters who are incredibly strong, independent, and often sexually ambiguous women.
4. The Middle East: *Palestine: A Nation Occupied*, by graphic journalist Sacco (2002), is a record of his travels throughout Palestine, meeting and speaking with Palestinians and

Israelis; *Jerusalem: A Family Portrait*, by Yakin and Bertozzi (2013) (now a Hollywood producer) is about his family's life in Jerusalem during the 1948 War of Independence, and is more about tensions between different Jewish communities there (religious, political, social-economic), then the Jewish-Palestinian tensions; *Jerusalem; Chronicles from the Holy City*, by Delisle, Firoud, and Dascher (2016) who happens to be Christian, tells the story of his experiences traveling around the West Bank, and Gaza as he accompanies his wife, a representative of Doctors Without Borders; *I Remember Beirut*, by Abirached, is the authors' memoir of being a child in Beirut at the height of the civil war; *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, by Pekar and Waldman (2012), tells the history of the Jews and Israel, from the time of the second temple, to the Holocaust, the creation of the state, and how his sense of pride transformed to disillusionment as he became aware of modern policies of Israeli government who seemed to distance themselves and the country for the founding values.

5. LGBT: *Tales of the Closet*, by Velez (1987) is about high school students wrestling with their sexuality and coming out of the closet; *Rainbow Warriors*, by Sarabia (2009), is a surreal comic about a male high school student who transitions to female and becomes a crime-fighter; *Love and Rockets*, a series by the Hernandez brothers, is about a mythical town along the Mexican/American border that has several major characters who are gay.
6. Race relations: *Black Hand and Brown Fist*, by Parker and Caleron (2015), addresses tensions between the Black and Latino communities, and provides narratives on ways to improve them; *El Gato Negro*, by Dominguez is about a Mexican-American social worker in Arizona who becomes a super-hero by night, fighting for the justice for his community.

7. Anti-Semitism and racism: *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, by Strum, tells the story of an itinerant baseball team, traveling through the south after World War I, playing baseball against local teams, and dealing with the KKK, and more subtle anti-Semitism; *Keeping my Hope*, is an impressive story about the Holocaust, written by Huh (2013), a 13 year old student, who spent over a thousand hours researching and writing this story for one of his classes; *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, by Eisner (2005), tells the story about the anti-Semitic conspiracy behind the falsified work that has been used by the Czar in Russia, Nazis, white supremacists, and racists around the world; *Muhammad Ali*, by Titeux and Ameziane (2016) is the story of the great boxer and his struggles as an African American as well as a Muslim in this country.
8. Prison reform: *The Real Cost of Prisons*, by Ahrens is a primer on the state of the prison system in America, told through vignettes about the real social cost in lives and economics in this country; *Prison Island*, by Frakes (2015), is a graphic memoir of her experience growing up in the last prison island, located in Washington state and was accessible only by plane or boat; *Paracellos*, by Giménez (2016), tells the author's experience in an orphanage in post-WWII Fascist Spain, that although was not an actual prison, it was run as one.
9. History: *American Widow*, is the author's memoir about being the widow of one of the victims of the destruction of the Twin Towers, and her road to coming to terms with that experience; *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*, by Hedges and Sacco (2012), is a hybrid of full text, combined with graphic stories about the state of American neighborhoods that have been decimated by the long-standing intentional as well as unintentional economic problems; *Zotz: Serpent and Shield*, by Parada (2011) is a story



about the Aztec peoples first encounter with the Spanish Conquistadors, told through the eyes of the indigenous people; *Latino USA, a Cartoon History*, by Stavans and Alcaraz (2000) is where Stavans (a Mexican Jew) takes on the history the Latino community and culture in the USA.

This list is by no means comprehensive, but it does provide a sample that illustrates the range of topics being explored. It is also very impressive to consider that many of these books have been written in the past 15 years, showing the growing interest in creating as well as reading these kinds of stories.

### **Diversity and Social Justice in Graphic Novels**

Discussions about diversity are actually two conversations: (a) diversity in content; and (b) diversity in production (authors, artists, publishing houses). There are many examples of traditional comic book stories and characters published as extended stories in the form of a graphic novel, such as: Miller's (1997) book, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*; Moore's (2014) *Watchmen*; or Moore's (2015) *Batman vs. Superman: The Greatest Battles*. Additionally, there are many graphic novels that are closer to non-fiction, about personal memoirs, and first person reflections about historical events, identity, and social justice. It is relevant to point out that where most history books are about the BIG events, and trends, graphic novels often tell stories about individuals, their lives, struggles and experiences, thereby putting a human face on these big events.

There are many contemporary graphic novels that have emerged largely from the mid-twentieth-century superhero comic-book tradition, and may be prone to the assumption that their treatments of conflict and morality are uniformly Manichean, romanticizing conflict and looking at personal and global struggles in simple terms of black and white, good and evils.

Contemporary graphic novels offer a more nuanced view of the world, addressing more complex issues in shades of grey (sometimes quite literally- there are many graphic novels printed in black and white) and share little with their superhero-imbued predecessors beyond a certain stylized aesthetic.

By using a narrative approach told with words and images, authors' focus on narratives about experience that is similar to the image/text stories used in photojournalism, except in the case of graphic novels, they situate themselves directly in the story, as one of the main characters (if not the main one). Using the mix of images and text, graphic novels can emphasize certain aspects of reality that traditional neither fiction nor non-fiction can do. For example, in Sacco's (2002) graphic novel, *Palestine*, Sacco uses his background drawings to illustrate a setting in which Sacco himself plays a part to convey information in a manner that he could not do if he were only using words. In many ways, graphic novels augment theoretical readings by providing concrete examples of abstract generalizations.

In *Paracuellos*, Spanish author Carlos Giménez (2016) tells his own story of the cruelties and pain forced upon him and other children who grew up in a church and state-run orphanage in post-Franco Spain. Reading the story, one is forced to wonder how much violence and social ills exist in Spanish society today because of these horrible institutions. Another big issue of social justice in contemporary society is the aftermath of global conflicts and wars. *I Remember Beirut*'s author Zeina Abirached tells her personal story about growing up and navigating with her family around Beirut in the midst of the civil war. She describes the constant din of gunfire and explosions, and discovering streets that visited with her mother that had been completely destroyed. *War Brothers: The Graphic Novel* by McKay and LaFrance (2013) tells the story of a young boy in Uganda, captured by the warlord Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army.

Following the boys story from capture to release, the story unflinchingly describes the sub-human conditions that he was forced to live in, and the barbaric activities that he was forced to do. Both of these stories describe true events from the eyes of children, and call out to the reader to engage in social justice activities to help provide for these young veterans while acting and speaking out for social justice, as a verb and not as a noun.

If we consider Gardner's (2000) ideas concerning multiple intelligence, we can see that among other modalities, combining and integrating two important sensibilities- visual and textual thinking in one form, can provide an inductive basis from which to help readers understand both theoretical and practical concepts, and that "pairing text with often powerful visual imagery, graphic novels offer a highly intimate look at real-world issues" (Juneau & Sucharov, 2010, p. 172). Graphic novels are able to explore complex relationships between the individual and their society in ways that books or movies cannot. Graphic novels illustrate aspects of society that are not credibly described in a book, or may pass by too rapidly in a film for the viewer to see. Interesting and often entertaining, graphic novels engage readers intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically, because they show aspects of subject matter that more conventional tools sometimes cannot. Graphic novels can be an appropriate medium through which to access the stories and versions of each side that other media cannot do as effectively. Again, Sacco's (1994) *Palestine* illustrates the complexity and nuances of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by creating a context of his narrative through the combination of the text of the narrative with his images of the time and place of his visit, in a sequential story that invites the reader to join the author on their journey of exploration.

Like movies, graphic novels are sensory and immersive; but like books, they require a degree of activeness in the consumer's position. In their optimal form, they combine the leading

aspects of film and prose to deliver a cognitive and affective experience through which to access their subject matter. Graphic novels can also address complex and thorny issues by looking at them obliquely. For example, *The Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughn, 2006) tells the story of the chaos resulting from the 2003 American bombing of Baghdad, but through the eyes of four lions that escaped the destroyed zoo. Looking at the destruction of the city through their eyes is a powerful narrative that transcends political opponents, by looking at the human-created carnage.

Another compelling example of this is Art Spiegelman's brilliant (and Pulitzer Prize winning) *Maus*. Originally published as a serial in the comic's anthology *RAW* magazine, between 1980-1991 before being compiled into two volumes, *Maus* popularized the graphic-novel genre as a way of accessing politics and history. By pairing spare text with often-powerful visual imagery, graphic novels offer a highly intimate look at real-world issues. When used in the classroom, these kinds of graphic novels allow educators to broach difficult subjects such as racism, the Holocaust, nuclear war, cultural and gender identity, and other important and current topics in ways that students may find more compelling.

One way that graphic novels can engage learners can be explained is through the theory of trans-media media, a method of storytelling in which multiple storylines are told through backstories, secondary characters and plot-lines to add additional context of important, and sometimes missing details of the primary story. Oftentimes these back stories are told in media forms that are different from the primary story, such as the *Star Wars* universe, where comics, graphic novels, books, radio plays and other media are used to provide details about characters and subplots to more fully engage the audience. Jenkins notes, novels can engage learners can be explained is through the theory of transmedia media, a method of storytelling across different mediums.

Using transmedia storytelling as a pedagogical tool, wherein students interact with platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or Tumblr permits students' viewpoints, experiences, and resources to establish a shared collective intelligence that is enticing, engaging, and immersive, catching the millennial learners' attention, ensuring learners a stake in the experience. (Transmedia storytelling, n.d., para. 1)

From this, we can extrapolate that graphic novels are part of this shared experience, especially when considering the growing popularity of its students' views about graphic novels and comic books, as well as many yearly and well-attended comic-themed conferences such as Comic Con, Comics Expo, Comickaze and others. Additionally, we see the increase of movies and sequels such as *The Avengers* that are based upon comics and graphic novels.

But even within the world of graphic novels, there are examples of transmedia to tell backstories. One example is Eisner's *Fagin the Jew*, which tells the back-story of Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*. Eisner tells a compelling story about the culture and history of immigrant communities in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, in particular, the two Jewish communities living there- the established Sephardic Jewish community (those from Spanish speaking countries) and the Ashkenazi (new arrivals from Eastern European). This type of story telling relates directly to the earlier example of the *Classics Illustrated* series, where classic novels could be used to help some students acquire an understanding of general stories, rather than slogging through the originals.

Another benefit of back stories is that they can address issues pertaining to social justice because they place important narratives in specific context by addressing important issues such as the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society, economic, political and

social rights and opportunities. Pedagogically, these stories focus on narratives that can help students set aside questions of right and wrong—debates that can easily create a brittle classroom atmosphere—and focus instead on the questions that are critical to understanding how crucial issues such as human rights, the environment, world politics and individual, social and communal identities unfold. For this to happen in different learning environments, it is necessary to help educators and their audiences understand that there is a place for graphic novels in describing and exploring issues of social justice.

The future of this form awaits its participants who truly believe that the application of sequential art, with its interweaving of words and pictures, could provide a dimension of communication that contributes—hopefully on a level never before attained—to the body of literature that concerns itself with the examination of human experience. (Eisner, 2008, p. 141)

### **Community and Personal Identity in Graphic Novels**

The merging of images with text is the building block that graphic novels and comic books use to tell a story that can be both entertaining and educational. Traditionally, comic books are filled with super heroes, talking animals, teenage angst, romance and satire, leaning more towards the entertainment side of the spectrum. On the other hand, graphic novels can address similar topics, but with a different sensibility that more deeply looks at the qualities, and challenges of the attributes that define us as human beings. For example, the animal characters in Spiegelman's novel, *Maus*, present a very different narrative and emotional connection than that of Mickey Mouse. The oblique way of looking at life issues illustrates the dynamic nature of individual and community identity, enabling readers and learners to explore their own histories, issues and experiences. This is especially valuable for immigrants and new arrivals to this

country, struggling with defining and creating new identities for themselves in such a diverse, multicultural society. Sociologist Rumbaut, an expert on issues of immigration and refugee resettlement, describes the immigration experience as an identity shift, and that people's immigration stories become a source of defining, redefining and understanding their lives prior to, during and after their immigration experience. Coming to a new country forces immigrants to re-evaluate, re-calibrate, and sometimes re-create personal and communal identities in order to assimilate into their new environment and culture. Having left the familiarity of their communities, cultures, language, and family, they are then faced with new opportunities and challenges. But, it is often the children of immigrants who are challenged the most, and that "many second-generation students may face more identity-related fluctuations as they wrestle with their family traditions, than do those who arrive directly from other countries." (Rumbaut as cited in Danzak, 2011, p. 188)

Graphic novels integrated into school curriculum can be used to start discussions about ideas that are important to students, such as that of multiple personal, national and community identities, the impact of trying to assimilate into the new societies, as well as issues pertaining to gender, or race. Gene Luen Yang, the newly appointed United States National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and author of *American Born Chinese*, compared the immigrant experience to that of Superman, writing "dual identities are a daily reality for the children of immigrants. Many of us use one name at home, another at school...We move between two different sets of expectations the way many superheroes do" (McEvers, 2016, n.d., para. 1). Additionally, Yang says that students can read and relate to instructional strategies that include reflecting on book, composing a short story about their families, home countries, and various aspects of immigration, and then collaboratively editing each other's writing in an instructional

context that highlighted various aspects of English syntax, spelling, and mechanics. Yang's ideas illustrate some of the strengths of this art form, combining both text and images that address the needs and styles of both visual and text-based learners, by demonstrating the relationship between text and images. Together, they provide different clues about the characters, setting and narrative that address the cognitive needs of different types of learners. In sequential art (both comics and graphic novels), readers progress their own pace, moving backwards and forwards as they want, stopping at panels or pages of interest to that need greater study. Whereas movies and television are totally in the moment, graphic novels can be both synchronous and asynchronous, as readers move ahead in real time, or stop to reflect on specific text or images. They can be in multiple languages, with translations as part of the panel, which greatly assist in the teaching of English as a second language.

The use of comics to support language learning in the ESL classroom is not a new concept. In the article *Defining Identities Through Multiliteracies*, Danzak cites American comic book writer and editor, George Wright's argument that comics provide visual support for ESL's construction of meaning during reading, and suggested incorporating comics into writing activities for the students. Even a comic such as Archie can provide humorous and enjoyable reading for English learners and can offer cultural insights into teenage life in North America, a feature that the English Learners highly value. Teachers found that Archie supports literacy learning by providing "useful vocabulary and cultural and linguistic understandings of humor" (Danzak, 2011, p. 190). Readers learn to decode print as well facial and body expressions, as well as symbolic meaning of certain images and postures. Educators need only to do simple review of graphic novels and comics' titles to find appropriate books for students for age/subject.



Educators Norton and Vanderheyden summarized this, writing, “For learners struggling to understand academic texts in a second language, the comic book represents an exciting opportunity to engage. This statement represents an exciting opportunity to engage with text from a position of strength rather than weakness” (Danzak, 2011, p. 189). This statement represents the abandonment of the learning deficit model that is often employed on English learners, in favor of a perspective that values diversity and emerging bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths.

English Learners can use graphic novels to make special connections with culturally diverse characters struggling through a process of self-inquiry and identity development, such as the teen characters presented in the graphic novels *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) and *Skim* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2009). They can also focus on the immigration experience such as *Persepolis I* and *Persepolis II* (Satrapi, 2003) and *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007), or *Arab in America* (El Rassi, 2007). Using graphic novels that focus on themes of social inequities and social justice, books such as *Two cents plain* (Lemelman, 2010), *Maus I* and *Maus II* (Spiegelman, 1973, 1986), and *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007). Boatright, an assistant professor of English at the University of Georgia, provides a critical analysis of this process and concludes that “English language arts teachers can assist their students in developing an analytical awareness of graphic novels power to represent immigrant experiences and how these representations privilege certain immigrant experiences while leaving countless other immigrant experiences untold” (Boatright, 2010, p. 475).

Another important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general, in ways that are more accessible to a wider range of students and learning styles as well as language skills. This gives voice to minorities, as well as

people with diverse viewpoints. As an example, *The Four Immigrants* by Japanese-American author Kiyama is an early example of Manga, a Japanese style graphic novel. Originally written in Japanese, it was only recently (late 1990's) rediscovered and translated into English. It describes the life of four Japanese immigrants in San Francisco, California, from 1904 to 1924, in a simple black- and-white entertaining style. The stories, based on Kiyama's real life, provide authentic insight into the lives, struggles, successes and activities of Japanese immigrants in the United States. Kiyama also provided helpful endnotes and a bibliography, making comic book a fun, and instructive read.

Another example of a graphic novel used to explore identity is the *Still I Rise*, a graphic history of African Americans, Laird, Laird, and Bey's (1997) book. Researched and written by African Americans it may be "hard for white Americans to read because of its harsh judgment on U.S. history, but it does celebrate the resilience of African Americans" (Schwartz, 2006, p. 62). *March*, the three volume series by Lewis, Aydin and Powell (2013) tells the remarkable story of Congressman John Powell's life from being raised as a sharecropper, his meeting with Martin Luther King, his beating by white policemen on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, through his education and to his work as a US congressman, speaking out and working to write laws for social justice. The racism and injustice felt by Lewis are echoed in Toufic El Rassi's autobiographical story, *Arab in America*. He was born in Beirut and came to America when he was only one year old, so he considered himself an American Muslim. But things began to change after 9/11 when a nervous neighbor contacted the FBI about him. His story came out to address the realization that the average American couldn't distinguish Arabs and Muslims from other nationalities and faiths.

## Exploring Identities in Non-Superhero Graphic Novels

Graphic novels share a demographic similar to computer games, by appealing to the media consciousness of teens and those in their early through mid-20s. This generation has been raised on television, movies, and computer games, making them very visually literate. Although, there is an overlap of conventions attendees, it can be argued that based on informal observation of people at comic book conventions (such as Comic Con, one of the major annual comic book conventions that take place in cities around the globe), the demographic of fans is much broader than just the gamers, because of its inclusivity of multiple modalities of media.

Subjects that are difficult to broach in the classroom, such as race, religion, and the anxiety about community differences can be introduced to students in graphic novels in ways that other media cannot. Graphic novels are immediate, reversible, and non-linear and can aid untrained teachers on how to handle differences, and start conversations about difficult issues. There are numerous examples of graphic novels that tell stories about youth growing up in new and different, and how the events that they experience shape them into adults, young adults or even mature youth. These stories describe transitions from childhood to adulthood, and from immigrant or refugee status into a new culture and community. Yang's (2006) *American Born Chinese* explores the issue of identity from multiple perspectives- emotional, personal, social, as well as multicultural perspectives that address cultural and community issues relating to diversity. Graphic novels examine assumptions of complex issues, such as of shifting identities, in an oblique manner, similar to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. But in this case, the stories are told as graphic novels rather than shadows.

Comic book classic superheroes, such as *Superman*, *Batman*, and others represent archetypes similar to the heroic figures in classical mythology. It is significant to note that with

few exceptions, such as *Supergirl* or *Wonder Woman*, most superheroes in comic books were white males. The primary reason for this is that in the early years of comic books, the traditional demographic of both readers and writers were white males. But, graphic novels changed this by presenting the stories of regular people facing extraordinary circumstances and events. As these stories have continued to develop, the demographic distribution of authors, artists, and readers has significantly broadened to be including a greater representation of cultures, communities, gender, and race identity. Content of the stories has also broadened as new stories increasingly address critical issues about historical and current events. In a 2014 article, journalist Mark Peters who writes about comic and graphic novels for Salon described current transformation in comics, and said that there are also stories about social justice that integrate contemporary characters or story lines, into the original storyline, and there are contemporary stories about race or gender switch-ups, such as a black Lois Lane or Capitan America, or a female Thor (Peters, 2014).

Many fans complain or reject ideas about switching genders or races, but creators of graphic novels have other ideas. In a July 2015 interview on the fan site *Geek Twins*, Stan Lee, arguably the master of the current super-hero genre, told bloggers Maurice and Nigel Mitchell that,

a lot of [my Twitter followers] have been saying that he (male actors) ought to have a chance to audition for the role. So I tweeted back by saying, as far as I'm concerned ... anybody should have a chance to audition for the role. I certainly think he should have a chance to audition. (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2015, n.d., para. 2)

Lee also believes that characters in existing stories should remain in their gender or race because that is how there were designed. But he also knew characters should be

open to any actor, black or white [and who] should get to audition for a role as a superhero, saying, "What I like about the costume is that anybody reading Spider-Man in any part of the world can imagine that they themselves are under the costume. And that's a good thing." (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2015, n.d., para. 2)

When asked about the Sony e-mail leaks that said Spider-Man has to be Caucasian, Lee commented that he wouldn't mind if Peter Parker had originally been black, a Latino, an Indian or anything else, that he stays that way. But that they originally made him white. He did not see any reason to change that. He added,

the fan backlash has nothing to do with anti-black, or anti-Latino, or anything like that. Latino characters should stay Latino. The Black Panther should certainly not be Swiss. I just see no reason to change that which has already been established when it's so easy to add new characters. I say create new characters the way you want to. Over the years Lee has created hundreds of superheroes, so he feels it's easy to create great superheroes of any gender, race or even species. (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2015, n.d., para.3)

These characters have seeped out of the genre of comic books and into the world of graphic novels, allowing authors to break stereotypes and create rich and complex characters and stories.

The reimagining of super heroes is not limited to America. In 2009-2010, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art hosted an exhibition from India called *Hindu Superheroes. Heroes and Villains: The Battle for Good in India's Comics*. Many of the stories in these graphic novels were interpretations of traditional Hindu tales and the characters were drawn in the style of buff American superheroes such as Superman or Batman.

## Icon and African American Identity

Closer to home is ~~McDuffie's~~ (1997 graphic novel, *Icon: A Hero's Welcome*, which takes a cue from the original Superman story about an alien child from space who leaves his planet, arrives on earth (America) and assumes a new identity, in this case, that of a black man. But there is a twist to this story. This black man has the sensibility of a conservative white man, and it takes a black woman from the ghetto to help him negotiate through all of the issues associated with a white society. She does this by becoming his costumed sidekick, assuming the identity of a social translator/journalist/historian/archivist for this spaceman to help him as well as record his stories as an "African- American Superman" (Brown, 1997, p. 49). Icon, the main character, participates in an origin story that only superficially resembles that of Clark Kent. The first four, text-free pages of the novel depict Icon's voyage to Earth with a gray-skinned, muscular being with three fingers on each hand and no nose, traveling through space when his ship is attacked. He locates an escape vehicle, blasts off, and crashes in a field on Earth just outside of a plantation slave cabin. A young African American woman hears the noise, investigates the strange metal object, and finds a tiny black baby lying on the passenger seat into which Icon was lately strapped, and the ship's sensors and his own alien DNA have prepared him with culturally appropriate camouflage. Icon represents one facet of the universe of black superheroes created by Milestone Media, an independent publishing company founded in 1993 by four African American businessmen, Derek T. Dingle, Dwayne ~~McDuffie~~, Denys Cowan, and Michael Davis. These entrepreneurs wrote, illustrated, published, and highlighted this story specifically to "address the lack of minority representation in comics, and the often stereotypical nature of that representation and the quality and diversity of African-American life" (Brown, 1997, p. 31).

The publishers of *Icon* were guided by two central principles when designing their titles: to create characters of several different ethnic groups and to appeal to a broad audience of readers. Attaining both of these goals required a certain amount of delicate negotiation; the founders claim to see their project as “entertainment first and a source of political agency second” (Brown, 1997, p. 32). Brown, author of a book-length study of Milestone's innovations in the field of comics, argues that “it is important for Milestone to avoid being perceived as political so that their business can succeed” (Brown, 1997, p. 55).

While Brown tries to separate the artistic value and fan appeal of Milestone Media's products from their work's political implications, only a brief perusal of *Icon: A Hero's Welcome* is necessary to discern that the comic's authors chose specific settings, themes, storylines, and characters to highlight the social conflicts that grow out of racial difference.

Reading *Icon* in relation to other examples of African American graphic narratives offers insight into the ways in which such narratives rely on the tension between image and text to challenge stereotypical representations of race and gender. As Brown suggests, “the Milestone superheroes [can] function as a focal point for interpreting revisionist notions of African American characters in comparison to more mainstream comic book ideals” (Brown, 1997, p. 2). The company's conscious attention to its characters' social positions translates into complex critiques of contemporary identity politics.

Once again, Rocket both recognizes the potential social ramifications of characters' ethnic identities and uses their experiences to educate *Icon* about African American life. As his biographer, she also positions their adventures in the context of the overall superhero genre. She understands the textual precedents to their exploits and comments on their participation in narrative conventions with the self-reflexivity that characterizes many superhero comics. That

self- reflexivity is a central component of the entire Milestone universe, as demonstrated when Icon intervenes briefly in others' stories. (Ryan, 2006)

In *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form*, McCloud (1994) argues that “gender balance and minority representation” (p. 11) are goals of modern comics professionals. The creators of African American graphic novels have taken on these challenges in their reexaminations of popular histories and conventions. Such a large-scale project promises fans of the genre a lengthy future in and beyond the past.

These books broke the barriers imposed on the media by early publishers, providing a wider, inclusive voice mirroring contemporary society, cultural and political issues. More often though, the stories in graphic novels are about single important, complex and critical issues facing contemporary society. Graphic novels are not limited to using only familiar characters, so authors have been able to break out of the stereotypical racial and gender roles and explore new worlds and narratives.

### **A Case Study About Creating Graphic Novels in the Classroom**

One of the more interesting programs using graphic novels to investigate social justice takes a very different approach. Rather than using existing graphic novels to start conversations, a team of educators provided instruction about the formal elements of graphic novels, similar to the material found in McCloud’s (1994) *Understanding Comics*. The students then created their own stories and in order to explore their shifting identities. This project, called Graphic Journeys Project was developed in a in West Florida school district to teach middle schools students to write their own stories in the form of graphic novel, theorizing that graphic novels can assist people in their community transitions from immigrant or refugee to new resident in order to gain a better understanding of who and what they are becoming as well as the process itself. This



project was done with 32 middle school English learners who told their personal family stories about immigration through graphic novels. A critical component of this project was to help them explore their shifting identities from where they came from (leaving behind families, friends, communities and cultures) to a new country where they were required to learn and adapt to the language and customs.

Graphic Journeys was a multimedia literacy project that took place over a period of six months in the ESOL classroom of a diverse public middle school on the west coast of Florida. As a multimedia, personal writing project, Graphic Journeys engaged teen ESL classes in the composition process while building bridges to help them acquire academic English language skills. This project offered 32 ELs the opportunity to research their family's immigration narratives and depict them as graphic stories. The stories were compiled and published in hardcover books that were distributed to each participating student at a large-scale family/community event.

The context of The Graphic Journeys project was to create a framework for students to explore identity-as-narrative, situated in an ESL classroom. The students created a conceptual framework for their telling own stories in detail in the graphic novel and comics format. The teachers “supported the students reflections on the implications of this type of project, and provided recommendations based on integrating a multi-literacies pedagogy with academic English language instruction” (Danzak, 2011, p. 187). The result of this is that students were able to increase their knowledge of the English language by using a multi-literacy pedagogy to telling stories that they were intimately familiar with-their own.

## **In the Future**

Most of the literature and criticism about graphic novels examine characters and books that address the relationships between multiple identities, social justice, historical events and other narratives, but from the viewpoint of authors of these books. Other articles describe the power of using comics to promote visual literacy, assist individuals to understand and assimilate into new communities and societies.

At the same time, there is a dearth of literature examining the benefits and processes used for students to create their own graphic novels to explore and understand issues that are personal and important to them. Issues such how learning about the formal elements of sequential storytelling, and the different kinds of tools that are used, such practical (pens, pencils, and paper) or digital. Finally, there is little to no research about best practices that are used, to teach students how to use text and images to write compelling, and authentic stories. However, before such practices can be enumerated or educational impacts assessed, the range and variation of uses and users of graphic novels for learning must be described.

When looking at the tools and methods that educators use to engage students and learning, one is struck by the diversity of media and methods that are currently in use. Along with the traditional methods and media such as books, papers, chalk boards, lectures and tests, many educators are looking towards alternative media to provide content, creation tools and new curricula. In the not so distant past there were slide projectors, shared televisions, records and tapes. Over the years, popular forms of entertainment have been developed and used for education. Television brought shows developed by educators such as *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers*, along with more prosaic shows such as *Dora the Explorer*, *Arthur* and many others provided children with basic learning skills along with lessons in social behavior.

Other popular forms of media such as theater and movies have also found their way into education, along with more recent forms of media such as comics, graphic novels and computer games. Each form has its own unique qualities and media characteristics that support different demographics and needs. This idea helps form the theory of transmedia, where every unique each media can tell a unique story or part of a story that uses the blends the narrative with the media. For example, a radio play will be told differently from a movie or a graphic novel. Sometimes content is adapted from other sources for educational purposes, other times new content is developed specifically for educational audiences. The end result is that graphic novels are a form of media that can successfully transition from entertainment to education.

The previous chapter illustrated that two of the primary topics graphic novels address are social justice, and issues relating to the identity of the individual as well as the individual's place in community. It is interesting to note that much of the research into this is in fact 5 to 10 years old, and was done before the research into the uses of transmedia in education. Although there has been some data collected about specific graphic novels with strong messages and content that is directly about social justice, in particular about the immigrant experience, and how it is integrated in formal learning environments, such as schools and academia, as well as articles about graphic novels used in a specific classes such as history. The research also describes popular books and methods that teachers use as launching points to start classroom dialogues about critical issues such as social justice, exploring a person's identity as an individual and within a community, as well as exploring the challenges facing immigrants and refugees as they as they develop new identities in a new land.

Within the existing literature, there are virtually no articles that examine how graphic novels are integrated into a formal curriculum, published before the early 2000s as well as a

general misunderstanding about the quality of the narrative found graphic novels. The result of this is that they are often unfairly compared to popular comic books filled with superheroes and talking animals, which leads to misconceptions about their efficacy in exploring critical and relevant issues in formal learning environments. Because graphic novels are an unconventional media for use in classrooms, developing standards for using them may be difficult or even undesirable. Yet, we do see that individual teachers who have identified, and selected specific stories for specific classes, and concurrent with other forms of popular media such as computer games, there is an increasing level of interest in using graphic novels in the classroom. Although most of the research is about integrating existing stories in curriculum, there is little written about how students create their own graphic novels to tell their own stories.

One reason for this growing interest is found in number of compelling new titles being released. There is evidence that of positive changes, partly as a result into an increase of academic investigations into graphic novels in formal learning environments. For example, self-referencing books such as McCloud's (1994) *Understanding Comics*, address the formal elements about the structure of graphic novels while Nick Sousanis' (2015) *Unflattening* explores more philosophical and esoteric issues such as the elemental nature of the relationship between marks (images) and words. There is evidence that there is a growing understanding of educators about of the power of graphic novels in education, similar to the ways that movies were introduced. A very informal survey of educators, authors and fans conducted by the author shows near-unanimous comments graphic novels are a current, relevant and important media to bring into the classroom.

A second reason for the increased interest in graphic novels is that they represent one of the fastest growing media in the US. According to ComicChron, one of the primary resources for

tracking sales, the overall sales of comic books and graphic novels reached \$579.12 million, up by nearly \$40 million from the previous year. In fact, over the past decade, sales of comic books and graphic novels have increased between 20-30 million dollars a year (Comic Book Sales by Year, n.d.), illustrating that this growth in popularity is parallel to the growth of computer games. Furthermore, history shows that most new forms of popular media, including graphic novels, begin as forms of entertainment, followed by informal adaptation to classrooms. The next step of this evolution is for formal academic investigations into the process and benefits of integrating a specific media in educational settings. This has happened to popular literature, cinema and even computer games, such as recent investigations of computer games and learning conducted by academics such as Ito, Jenkins and Barab, and others. The interest of this author is to explore the phenomenon of the use of graphic novels in formal educational settings.

The most basic questions about introducing graphic novels in different learning environments are: Why are educators teaching with graphic novels? Why not traditional literature, textbooks, or even movies? What can graphic novels provide that traditional literature cannot? Following this come a series of procedural questions such as: Why have some educators decided to use this specific medium to address important and critical issues? Why have certain stories been selected and not others? Are there commonalities in the practice and titles that are used by teachers? The answers to these questions will help provide a foundation for both the mundane (what levels are taught, syllabi, etc.), as well as deeper, philosophical questions that describe what educators hope to accomplish with graphic novels, as well as understanding their learning objectives and expectations.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design**

The use and benefits of popular content and media (such as films) in education has been fairly well accepted and documented. Research by scholars such as Mimi Ito, Professor in Residence at the Humanities Research Institute at University of California, Irvine, Sasha Barab, Professor in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society, and Executive Director of the Center for Games and Impact at Arizona State University, Henry Jenkins, Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts, at University of Southern California, and Joi Ito (Mimi Ito's brother), the director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Media Lab, an interdisciplinary research lab that encourages the unconventional mixing and matching of seemingly disparate research areas support programs and research studying the impact of digital media and games in education and learning are investigating areas such as MIT's Using Games in the Classroom, and ASU's study about the impact of games in education.

Yet, although graphic novels (and their older sibling, comic books) have been the subject of many articles about specific titles, classes or individuals, there are no broad formal studies about how graphic novels can be and are used in education. There are several schools and centers that offer programs, and even degrees in creating comics, such as the California College of the Arts in Oakland, California offers an MFA in Comics, and the Savannah College of Art and Design offers several degrees (BA, BFA, MA, MFA) in sequential art. The Center for Cartoon Studies, in Vermont, offers a two-year program that focuses on sequential art, specifically comics and graphic novels. But none of these schools are research institutions and do not offer classes on the pedagogical use of comics in education.

Even without centers for the formal study about the benefits of comics and graphic novels in education, there is informal, anecdotal and observational evidence that point to an increase in

interest in this. Listservs such as ComixScholars call for academic papers and conferences about the benefits of comics in education on a weekly, if not daily basis, and ComicCons around the world also show an increase in the subject based on the number of panels exploring different issues about education that take place at every conference. Yet, there continues to be a misperception about the efficacy of using graphic novels in education and learning. One only needs to look at the marketplace, as well as the number of fans, to see ample evidence of the growing interest in graphic novels to comic books by students and teachers alike. Chapter 2 offered examples of variety of titles and books about graphic novels, but the author feels that a closer examination of teachers who use graphic novels shows that although they have a more sophisticated approach to narrative and topics that set them apart from comics, they are both valuable tools for education. But, because of the lack of formal studies about using this genre in schools, it was necessary to begin with an exploratory study.

### **Study Goals**

The primary goal of this study was to investigate, document, and understand the reasons that educators who use graphic novels in their classrooms choose to use them, rather than traditional text. Secondary goals were to identify the classes they teach, and to identify commonalities and shared best practices. Although a limited number of interviews were scheduled, the author hoped that by reporting on the learning objectives, students' reactions, the books they use, types of assignments give, the criteria that they use to define the critical elements for success in their classes, as well as the instructors' own relationships with graphic novels, it would be possible to capture enough data to answer the primary question of why.

It was decided to use a phenomenological research process, for designing the research questions as well as conducting the interviews. This method proved particularly appropriate to

this study because it permitted the subjects (teachers) to describe their points of view, reasoning and experiences in selecting the titles that they use as well as developing their own sets of learning outcomes and methods. The author was able to look at both the individuals' choices, curriculum and reasons for selecting graphic novels.

This method also demanded that the researcher acknowledge and take into consideration his own biases and experiences. For example, the author taught *The Jewish Graphic Novel* at university level, allowing him to acquire experience and understanding in how graphic novels can be used in an academic setting. This gave the author the tools, knowledge to be able to drill into the participants responses in order to gain an understanding of the why and what of selecting graphic novels as opposed to other media.

Besides gaining an understanding of the context of using graphic novels to study social justice, individual and community identity, the phenomenological protocol helped to identify other significant issues, as well as the motivations, challenges, benefits, and experiences of the teacher and of the authors, and to see what is currently being done in the field. The literature review in Chapter 2 shows that existing classes and curriculum are predicated by the choices of individual teachers. As such, there is no discernable pattern these teachers' reasons for using this media. Using a phenomenological protocol helped the author was able to identify from the data collected, experiences of using graphic novels in six different learning environments that created and defined an infrastructure for understanding the similarities and differences for using graphic novels in formal learning environments.

There were several inherent challenges in using this approach. For example, although there are classes, academic programs and even schools that teach comics and graphic novels, there are no research institutes or centers dedicated to the formal study of comics and graphic



novels in educational settings, similar to programs that study gaming. There is a listserv called ComixScholars that is run out of the English Department at University of Florida, but the author was not aware of it at the time. Its primary focus is on individual comics as literature, as opposed to broad-based studies about their impact on education.

As the interviews were transcribed for analysis, it became clear that despite the similarities in the sensibilities of the research subjects, there was little identifiable common ground. But it was also clear that there were still useful data to capture. In order to accommodate this understanding, it became necessary to employ a case study analysis, specifically looking at a key case study because the author's awareness of the topic could offer reasoned lines of explanation based on the setting and circumstances. Also, in recognizing that no data and narrative exist in a vacuum, the author understood that one of the benefits of a case study approach is that it

facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources.

This insures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses, which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

(Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544)

Because of the multitude of titles and styles, there is no single way to understand graphic novels in the classroom. But the phenomenological methodology provided answers (or at least clues) to the how and why questions, as well as providing the "contextual conditions that [I] believe are relevant to this study" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 545). In analyzing the data within the contexts provided by the research subjects, the author was able to create a construct that helped to define the relationships, similarities and differences in approach, methods, and books used, which helps the author to identify best practices, as well as build a foundation for future studies.

## **Selection of Key Informants**

The teaching of graphic novels in a classroom is still rather unique endeavor, as compared to using novels to teach classic or modern literature. This created a challenge to identify appropriate research subjects and required a certain amount of flexibility in their selection.

## **Development of the Interview Protocol**

The interview questions were divided into two general categories: descriptive and exploratory. The former was to understand the demographics of the study, such as gender, age, class level taught, number of times that the class has been taught, and whether or not the instructor was a previous fan of graphic novels. The exploratory questions were to probe the instructors for the deeper meaning of their choices, to understand the selections of titles, their reasons and learning objectives, and the critical elements that were used to determine the success of the students and classes.

One challenge was the understanding that there are different cognitive understandings of information and narratives at each grade level. To address this, the interviewees were limited to teachers in high school and undergraduate colleges. This helped to contextualize their responses to the exploratory questions about learning objectives, student reactions, within a 6-year window of cognitive and intellectual development. A second factor is that the participants needed to have taught and used graphic novels in their classes for at least two terms, or have participated in a formal program or study about the use of graphic novels in education in their schools. This was designed to insure that instructors were experienced in building a curriculum that includes graphic novels; has structured assignments; and has an evaluation rubric for evaluating the students. Table 1 lists the questions and the matrix used to analyze the responses. Appendix A contains the request for participation in the study. Approval for the study is in Appendix B.

Table 1  
*Matrix of Questions and Responses*

I. Interview Questions	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
Q1- Demographics P1- What type of institution do you teach at? P2- What class level do you teach? P3- How many classes have you used graphic novels, or what was the length of study or program that you were involved in? P4- What was the subject of the class or classes, or what was the study or program? P5- What is your gender and age?					
Q2- How did you come to this choice? P1- Did someone recommend graphic novels? P2- Were you already a fan? If so, for how long? P4- Have you been to any comic conventions? P5- How did you select the titles that you use? P6- What were the criteria that led you to select the specific title(s) that you used?					
Q3- What do you intend to accomplish? P1- What were the learning objectives for this course? P2- Why did you choose these objectives? P3- How did you intend to accomplish this? P4- Can you give me some examples of the types assignments you gave? P5- How did you evaluate the assignments? P6- What were the criteria that you used to evaluate the assignments? P7- What were the criteria that you used to evaluate the students?					
Q4- What were the students' reactions to using graphic novels? P1- about the course? P2- about the content? P3- about the assignments?					
Q5- What are the critical elements for success? P1- How do you measure success in your class? P2- What tools do you use to measure success in the class? P3- How would you describe the level of your students' success?					
II. Artifacts, documents, syllabi, other submitted material					
Q1- What is the artifact? P1- What media is it? P2- How is this artifact used?					

In order to identify appropriate data subjects, the author decided to use social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Google+ to reach out to professional colleagues, authors of journals cited in this study. The author felt that this method would provide enough interview subjects for this work, but if this proved to be thin, the author planned to adapt a snowball sampling method. The snowball method assembles

a group of informants during the course of the study, provides a way to gain access to a population that has not formal organizational structure. In this method, the research begins with a small number of names of potential informants. Once a potential candidate becomes a confirmed informant, the researcher then ask[s] that informants to recommend one or more others who will also fit the criteria of the study. (Brown, 2012, p. 67)

A request for participation in the study was posted on Facebook, Google+ and LinkedIn, and emails were sent to several select individuals (teachers and writers). After two weeks, there were no responses on the social media sites, and several of the individuals contacted were cut from the list by mutual decision. A second posting on social media brought the same results. At that time, the author contacted a librarian acquaintance on Facebook, who also happens to be a fan of comics and graphic novels. The librarian suggested the University of Florida listserv Comixscholar, which proved to be a much more successful resource. Within a week of posting, there were six responses, and over the next two months, 10 additional teachers to responded. Each teacher was sent a questionnaire to assess his or her suitability to the study. After another month of culling and selecting, six teachers were selected to participate.

### **Demographics of Key Informants in the Study**

The six research subjects are a fairly diverse group of teachers. There are three males and three females, two college professors, three high school teachers, and one middle and high

school teacher. One of the college professors teaches Spanish literature at a small liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest, while the other is an ESL teacher at a Engineers college in the country of Oman. One HS teacher teaches AP English in Chicago, one is the curriculum specialist for a group of charter schools in Los Angeles, and one is a 9<sup>th</sup> grade world history teacher in Chicago. The final teacher is an ESL teacher at a joint middle/high school in northern Thailand. Of the six, four have been fans of comics since childhood, while two were introduced to them while in college. Also of the six, four have attended Comic Cons, and of those four, three presented. Table 2 displays the basic demographics of the research subjects: gender, age, grade level taught and subject, while Table 3 shows information about the location of the teacher (national or international), how long they have been fans, and if they have attended any Comic Cons.

Table 2  
*Basic Demographics*

	SI	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Male (age)		39	40		39	
Female (age)	45			30		26
College teacher	X				X	
High school teacher		X	X	X		
Middle and high school teacher						X
Subject	Spanish Lit.	AP English	Curriculum Specialist	9 <sup>th</sup> grade History	ESL	ESL

Table 3  
*Additional demographic information*

	SI	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
National	X	X	X	X		
International					X	X
Fan from youth		X	X	X	X	X
Comic Con		X	X		X	

### **Study Design**

The interviews were all scheduled via email correspondence, and took place during a three-month period. Each interview was conducted via Skype, and recorded with Call Recorder, a Skype recording utility. Each interview took between 60 and 90 minutes and followed the format illustrated in the question and response matrix in Table 1. All of the audio files of the interviews were placed into iTunes for listening and transcription, while the original files were backed up to an external hard drive for archival purposes. Although the author requested copies of syllabi and lesson plans, none were provided, despite several reminders.

The author did not feel it necessary to do complete follow up interviews, but did conduct email correspondence with all of the interview subjects for clarifications as needed.

### **Data Analysis**

The author did all of the transcriptions over a three-month period. The author listened to each complete recording 2-3 times, transcribing relevant comments, and marking time code for future reference. As the transcription process progressed, the author returned to specific sections to insure the data and the comments were accurate, and to obtain additional detail. The primary focuses of the transcriptions was to identify the responses to the specific questions asked, as well as to pick-up and record any other important data relevant to the study.

All of the subjects' responses to the questions were entered into the matrix shown in Table 1. In looking for common themes, the author first looked for common language. As an example, the question about learning objectives (Q3-P1), the author looked specifically for the sentences that contained learning objective, class goals or similar language that described the reasoning of the teachers. Other themes were not as easy or clear to label, and required multiple readings in order to identify the theme. One of the initial challenges that was identified early on in the process, was that although there were similarities in comments, there was very little actual common ground. Because not all of the responses shared any common language, the author employed an iterative process of multiple readings of the responses in order to identify real meaning in the answers, as opposed to interpretations, in order to determine additional themes.

Once the initial group of themes was established, they were reviewed by the author, and compared with the number of similar responses to determine if there were enough data for those themes to be included in the report. It was determined by the author with guidance from the Chair, that four was the minimum number to be included.

Coding proved to be another challenge caused by the lack of common ground, but again, an iterative process of reviewing the themes and answers provided the codes used (see Table 4). After determining the codes, the author returned to the matrix to identify appropriate quotes to illustrate the thematic commonalities in the data analysis in Chapter 4.

Table 4  
Codes and Definitions

Category: Visual	Definition for Coding
Develops visual literacy	Describes an instructional goal of demonstrating to students the relationships between a narrative, the text, and the images
Nurtures a love of reading and literature	Describes a positive impact on students' perceptions of reading taken it out of the context of print only books and placed in a text-image environment
Supports comprehension for ESL students	Describes how graphic novels support meaning making for second language learners by illustrating the relationships between text and context with action, and location.
Prepares students for specific	Prepares students for employment by placing professional nomenclature and terms in contextual narratives
Category: Content	
Native content- using comics, graphic novels to tell original stories rather than traditional books	Describes the role of graphic novels/comics in teaching multiple issues pertaining to social justice, such as current events, first-person accounts of historical episodes, personal memoirs,
Diversity in comics	Describes the value of graphic novels/comics as sources of diversity in many forms by using multiple voices to tell stories that clarify, explain and interpret factual individual narratives to global events as well as personal histories
Cultural studies	
Identifies the types of readers, and their content selections	Describes students' familiarity with traditional content, but told with a new media that is relatively inexpensive
Student authors and creators	Describes the motivation to document new stories about modern historical events, experience, journeys, and integration into new communities, cultures



## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

### Introduction

This study was conceived of as a modified phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experience of educators choosing to use graphic novels as curricular material in their courses. However, as the initial interviews progressed, it became increasingly clear that, rather than clear common ground, the informants in the study were very different in their personal journey to graphic novels as educational texts. The instructors are creative, educated and provided thoughtful unique answers that simply do not give the commonalities and meanings that the author had hoped for.

The limited areas of common ground will be addressed as such, and the rest will be presented as six case studies that describe their reasons and methods for using this media. After describing areas of shared experience, each case will be presented using a common structure that includes:

- Types of comics (Marvel super heroes or independent memoirs, historical events, cultural stories)
- Curriculum & titles
- Who supplies the material?
- Censorship: government and self-censorship
- Individual teachers' definition of social justice
- Textual literacy, encourage love of reading
- Complete comics or individual panels or pages
- Technology in teaching
- Unique attributes to the specific classes.

Because of the lack of common ground, it is important to note that not all of these issues are addressed in each case study. But the data that is presented is an accurate and rich description of the unique, and individual approaches that each teacher has developed for using graphic novels and comics in their classroom to teach social justice and issues of identity.

### **Common Ground**

Although the premise of the interviews was to understand the reasons that use comics and graphic novels to teach issues relating social justice and identity, the only distinctive, common thread shared by all of the teachers is to promote and support different elements of visual literacy. All of the six teachers address visual literacy through reading graphic novels, writing essays and answering questions about the content, while two teachers assign projects where need to create their own comics based on a supplied topic.

In the first group, S1, the professor of Spanish literature said that, “graphic novels better matches the general learning objectives of the course, with the added benefits of increasing visual literacy, since we live in an era of the need for increased visual awareness.” Additionally, S1 teaches a class on class on visual literacy, and states that students must, “think about form and media is topic based. Students look at visual memories, looking at art, at propaganda, film documentary, museums, all in a cultural context.” S2 mirrors this comment, and adds a caveat about teaching the media itself, and that graphic novels and comics “align with the learning objectives of the school, with modifications for the inclusion of visual literacy, and formal elements of graphic storytelling.”

Only three of the seven teachers directly aligned visual literacy with the theme of social justice. S1 said that, “One of the important reasons for using graphic novels is that they are directly related to helping students better understand and relate to contemporary society and

culture.” She also added that,

visual memory about Spanish Civil war and the last Argentine dictatorship looks at representations of memory, especially collective memory. They [the students] need to be grounded in how to do visual literacy, in a thematic course, looking at the evolution of iconic images by looking at art, and looking at propaganda”. S1 is also the only teacher to comment about the actual experience of reading comics and graphic novels in the classroom, saying, “Visual text, in graphic novels make the students come alive in new ways.

S4, a college history teacher who focuses on the Middle East, said that the,

panels engage students visually and textually, and that comics can increase visual literacy, which aide in a better understanding of complexities and nuances of Middle East, and a the ability to analyze different media and their impact on learning and understanding.

In addressing the formal elements of graphic novels, S3 says that the images are used

to predict, to look back, to understand sequencing, foreshadowing, etc. When people like to read, they keep on reading and their brain starts to figure these things out. This process increases visual and critical thinking, as well as critical engagement, which teaches them that through the reading comics, they learn to decipher images and text together.

S5 and S6 are the two teachers who although they did not address visual literacy in a clear way, they nonetheless were cognizant about its importance in education.

### **Case Studies**

Although there is little common ground among the research subjects, there is a plethora of data describing their reasons for using graphic novels, their approach to teaching social justice

and identity, and their approach to teaching. There is some conceptual overlap among the different responses, but it is more in the realm of sharing a common over-reaching process as opposed to common ground. By looking at the criteria listed in the introduction, as well some other, more personal choices, it is possible gain an understanding of some of the unique reasons that describe the reasoning of teachers who use graphic novels and comics in their classrooms.

### **Subject 1**

Subject 1, (S1) a 45-year-old female, teaches Spanish Literature, in Spanish at a liberal arts college in the state of Washington, and has been using graphic novels in her classes for 6 years. S1 had little to interest in comics or graphic novels until high school, when she was assigned to read *Maus*. S1 had never been exposed to anything like *Maus* and was inspired by originality and that the book was about representations of Shoah [Holocaust], that combined form with the content. Even though she was impressed with using what is essentially a comic to teach history, she had little to no additional experience with the genre until her first year of college teaching, when she was required to teach Satrapi's (2003) memoir, *Persepolis* as part of the freshman read. Following this, she read Moore's award winning book, *Watchmen*. After this, S1 started reading for fun; then, it turned professional after she acquired tenure, while in her late 30s. When she began to teach critical thinking, academic writing, and visual literacies, which goal is to develop individual and original critical perspectives, concepts, theories, and analyses. At this point, she began to take it [graphic novels] seriously, considering the relationships "between form, media, and topics; looking at art, at propaganda, documentary films, museums in a cultural context, and how to talk about the formal elements of graphic novels."

S1 teaches advanced intermediate students, which offers its own set of challenges, primarily obtaining books in Spanish. According to S1,

The different titles chosen for the different classes are driven by economics. What can I get on Amazon at reduced rates? There is very little in Spanish that is available online. Books need to be imported...I feel that I cannot make the students purchase and read one comic per week for \$50-\$75/week. So to make this work, I needed to started collecting titles, so that the course is content driven and that the books fit into the context of the course.

To do this, she been purchasing sets (enough for a class) of graphic novels in Spanish, whenever she travels to South America. Addressing the possibility of acquiring eBooks or other material online, S1 says “there is very little in Spanish that is available and free, and that online material does not allow you to actually handle the book.”

Most of the content is about social justice and history in Spain (the Spanish Civil War), and in South America, (the last Argentine dictatorship). Assignments include components that address visual memory, and representations of memory, especially collective memory. She adds,

The books are not stand lone and are all part of a thematic course, and that they need to be grounded in how to do visual literacy, the evolution of iconic images- through looking at art, propaganda, documentaries, and sometimes museum exhibits.

One important book that is available in Spanish is Scott McCloud’s (1994) *Understanding Comics*, which she used to introduce her students to the formal elements of graphic novels, so that they learn technical terms such as frame, gutter, etc. The graphic novels that S1 uses in her classes are all based upon the theme of the class, and the students are charged with looking at both the form and content in a cultural context as well as visual context. Courses are all in taught in Spanish. The theory is read in the language of its

origin, but the content in Spanish. Scott McCloud (1994) is read in Spanish and English. The language of reading is the students' choice, but all discussions (content and form) are in Spanish.

S1's learning goals vary from class to class, "each course has a different goal. Different kinds of courses have different levels, so each course has a different goal." In general, the goals match "the general learning objectives of the course, with the added benefits of increasing visual literacy, since we live in an era of the need for increased visual awareness." Also, using graphic novels corresponds to South America's tradition of political graphics. To support visual thinking, she has groups work together to make their own comics, from either their own stories, or adapting story that they all have read. For this the students,

usually go from text to graphics. In the group assignments, there is one person in each group who knows how to draw. The point is not so much as to draw well, but to be able to narrate the story. They imagine how to do the first page, introducing the main characters, to the setting, and the existential angst, focusing on how to translate their written text into a visual. Students think about details and importance of the things they may have overlooked. This teaches them how to think visually, and to look at details. At small liberal arts college, teaching political thinking and academic writing is more about traditional text analysis. But I want the students to think about form and content. They cannot just focus on form, or just focus on content...form and content is new to students because they have just studied traditional text and have never been asked to think also about form.

S1 reports that although the majority of her students have never used graphic novels or comics as primary academic resources in their classes, the overall response has been very positive,

For example when reading *Understanding Comics*, they latch onto that they enjoy seeing the form of the theory that they are reading. And for the first time the students don't complain about reading theory, because the theory is being visualized, and that they are about to apply it for the first time. It's accessible, it's fun and they actually learn a heck of a lot at the same time. It is a very good tool!

## **Subject 2**

Subject 2 (S2) is a 39 year-old male in Chicago, who has been teaching AP English in high school for 11 years. He has taught graphic novels, film, and creative writing in all grades, and has been focused on juniors and seniors for the past 4 years. Although he has been a fan of comic books since childhood (mostly Marvel and DC superheroes), he lost interest for about 10 years. In his high school unit on the Holocaust, his teacher assigned *Maus* to read, instead of Elie Weisel's *Night*, which had been in the standard curriculum. She told the class that "she was tired of teaching it, and the students were tired of reading it." His first experience in teaching a graphic novel in a class was 2007's *Beowulf* by Gareth Hinds, which he discovered by accident, while browsing in a bookstore. S2 said that he "was blown away by it", and that the edition really engaged the students. Their interest led him to search for other adaptations to bring to his students, and was supported by the department head, who also advocates for using graphic novels in school. Additionally, S2 has attended and presented at several Comic Cons in South Dakota, Denver, Chicago, Seattle and New York, where he presented with a group of seven other educators from different disciplines about using comics in the classroom.

From those early experiences, he developed learning objectives to “Increase visual literacy, demonstrate alternative ways of telling a story (through text and images), and introduce students to classic books and stories in an accessible language/media that also promotes reading.”

These learning objectives align with the learning objectives of the school, with modifications for the inclusion of visual literacy and the formal elements of graphic storytelling. It is critical for S1 to “increase visual literacy, to understand and identify formal elements of a graphic novel, as well as explain the relationship between text and images”. In order to do this, he assigns writing projects that he describes as a way to “Get the students to write on an art form in a professional level on an art form unlike any that they have written about before. It is a combination of text and visual analysis.” It is important for S2 to introduce technology into his class, which he does by having students blog and record podcasts. He explains this, saying,

Using blogs encourages them in a form that matches the content that they are writing about. This helps students to think about how writing exists in other forms than they know about, and opens their eyes to writing outside their comfort zone, to think visually, to talk about other things than what they're are used to talking about in English class, to introduce them to think about different types of questions about narrative and what is more effective to them. This type of assignment engages them because it is not a traditional essay and relates better to the media that they are studying.

S2 also assigns the students to create their own comics to demonstrate their understanding of the narrative structure and style of the medium. These assignments require the students to “create their own 3-4 page comic based on original material and art.” They



can do this independently, or as part of a group, very important component for the students is that “There were students who worried about their art skills, but partnered with artists so that they could still participate.” These collaborations are also important because it “echoes the way that most comics are created, in a collaborative manner with writers, artists, colorists, letterers and other skillsets.”

S2 relates that the students feel challenged and totally enjoy reading graphic novels. He encourages them to read during their down time and has created a library of graphic novels in his classroom for them. It is these titles that allow him to introduce titles relating to social justice. His selections contain “stories that explore many topical issues, and include many female protagonists, as well as a selection of stories by and about different ethnic communities.” He has volume 1 of the Scott Pilgrim series in his classroom library and discovered that when they complete the book, “the students rush to the [school] library to read the others.” When asked about how the students respond to his classes, S1 replied,

They love it! When asked why, many students admit that the graphic novels are the first books that they read cover-to-cover while in high school. They were so engaged that they was to read more graphic novels, as well as traditional books. The graphic novel is like a gateway to literacy.

### **Subject 3**

Subject 3 (S3), is a 40-year-old male, and works at a south Los Angeles charter school that is primarily for underserved communities. He was in the general work force for 10 years before switching to become a teacher for the LAUSD. He taught high school there, but grew tired and frustrated with receiving a pink slip at the end of every year, then transitioned to the charter school for a more stable work environment. He taught 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades for 3 years,

before becoming a curriculum specialist for the past three years schools. As the curriculum specialist, S3 works as part of a literacy team with new teachers from the five schools of the charter school system, “selecting content and building curriculum to help teachers develop resources that they do not have time to do.”

S3 has been a fan of comic books since childhood and always “believed that they are great tools for cognitive development of young thinkers and readers.” His stated goal is, “Primarily to increase student literacy and love of reading. Drive them to become part of the culture of literacy and empower the students to ask questions about the text and to pass on their newly acquired love of reading to their peers.”

For his first two years as a teacher at the charter school, the only graphic novels that S3 used were *Persepolis*, and *Maus*, “mostly because the school had already purchased them, so I used them.” Regarding the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom, the attitude of the school was that “if the kids came to class and there were no problems, you had the freedom of choice to use comics.” S3’s students came to class and enjoyed the material, so he brought his own collection to school for the students to read. There was an additional, practical reason for this, as he lived in a small apartment and had many long boxes filled with comics. His collection was mostly comics from Marvel and some Image, although he had stopped collecting while in mid-college “because of how women and minorities were represented.” Once he started teaching with comics though, he got interested again in Batman, because the students all seemed to love Batman.

As a curriculum specialist, S3 uses common core standards in selecting comics for classroom assignments because “common core standards [are] a gateway to literature because they have recommended levels of text,” and that “text used in class should have a certain level

of complexity, but measuring complexity itself is now more complex.” This requires him to help teachers select appropriate titles for their individual classes. At first, S3 used X-Men, Spiderman, Daredevil and Avengers because those titles were easily available. But one of the problems was that the different series were often confusing because the books were written by different authors and illustrated by different artists. This resulted in a lack of continuity, making it difficult for students to read. He began to “Select series where there was one writer’s voice, one art style, one comic world, because of the continuity and it was more engaging to the students.”

S3 strives to align the use of comics with the school’s learning objectives, but also to promote literacy in general. His goal then is primarily to give students the opportunity to acquire reading and critical thinking skills among students who were traditionally poor readers. Teaching kids to read text, or ESL is complicated enough. Adding visuals is like a cognitive reading apprenticeship, where students read out loud, and break down individual pages or panels to help them understand.

Teaching with graphic novels to recent readers is challenging not only because of the text, but also because of the images. It is not as simple as looking at a picture- a sequential novel uses images in a particular way that needs to be taught to students in order to help them gain a better understanding of the story. This is done so that they can

predict, to look back, to understand sequencing, foreshadowing, etc., When people like to read, they keep on reading and their brain starts to figure these things out, increasing visual and critical thinking. Critical engagement teaches them to read comics, decipher images and text and to interpret meaning. It is literacy, narrative and critical thinking based upon common core standards.

S3 advocates for informal, as well as formal learning assignments. For example, as an informal assignment,

Students in his classes spend the first twenty minutes in sustained silent reading.

Students choose whatever they want and read and are encouraged to read what they love. Most selected comics, but some read text a book, or literature.

Students would pick up a book at random, just to read, and then got hooked on a title/series. They asked for more of the series... Students came early to school and to class to read these books.

S3's formal assignments are much more rigorous and require students to "look at different types text and readings and then do expository analysis. They evaluate different types of text (fictional and real) and different types of information gathering to compare and contrast different voices, and perspectives."

Throughout the semester, students read complicated stories and then get specific writing assignments, related to the text (comic or traditional), where they are required to "use a formal narrative structure with a protagonist, antagonist, central conflict, characteristic traits (based on super heroes), setting and character." They have the choice to write either an essay, or as a short comic. If they choose to do a comic, they have the choice to hand draw it or use Pixton, an online program that has stock characters that the student artists can place and manipulate as needed. This last method allows them to focus on the text and narrative, as opposed to worrying about the art. Students can work individually, but are encouraged to work in a group, because "that also guides them in a consensus building activity."

Another group project that S3 assigns is based on a writer's workshop that also helps prepare them for life after school. For example, two students get a word to break down, such as "community". They need to discuss and identify words that define community. They then break that down the list to 5, then 3 words. Next, using those three words, they write sentences that define community. Then they make a one or two panel comic that use those two sentences. This teaches students the same exercises as the professionals, and what they do in school is like the outside world.

S3 derives this kind of collaboration from the hybridity theory, recognizing the different spaces that students populate in and then create bridges that transfer the skills from one space to another. Teachers supply the place for students to practice the skills through writing long form narrative or a comic. The teacher values how they communicate, and what they then bring to the class.

S3 says that the end of the year evaluations of the formal and informal learning exercises based on comics and graphic novels show that "students came to class reading below class level, and using standard reading evaluation tools showed that at the end of the year demonstrated a 100% increase of reading skills so that students were reading in a much higher grade level." Students were engaged, their learning skills improved and they not only enjoyed the class, they loved it.

#### **Subject 4**

Subject 4 (S4) is a 30-year-old female and has been a 9<sup>th</sup> grade world history teacher at a public school in the Boston area for 6 years. As a child, S4 was not interested in comics or graphic novels. But this changed in high school, when she was required to read *Maus*, and *Persepolis*, and her interest began to grow. After starting to teach, S4 had a professional

development opportunity to study graphic novels as part of a one-year online book group with other educators. This opportunity provided her the opportunity for deeper reflections on the genre, as the group read multiple social-justice and history themed graphic novels such as Glidden's (2010) *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days*, Soltani and Khalil's (2011) graphic novel about contemporary Iran, *Zahra's Paradise*, and from Egypt, the web comic *Qahera*, about a female Muslim super hero, written by 19-year-old art student, Mohamed. Several of the authors participated in the seminar, including Sarah Glidden (2010), with whom S4 has developed a friendship and professional correspondence.

S4 was already interested in the Middle East, saying "I had a personal interest in the region, the importance of events taking place there, so I integrated this into the general learning objectives of the course." She felt that these stories present a counter to the different stereotypes and oversimplifications of people in the Middle East." She began to seriously look at stories that addressed the human side of the history occurring in the present day. For example, when addressing the complicate life of women in the Middle East, she refers to *Qahera*, which "looks at women who choose to wear the hijab [the head covering worn by some Moslem women], and shows that it is not done out of oppression." This growing interest led her to the Palestinian city of Ramallah for three months, to interview local graphic artists in order to gain a better understanding of their experience.

S4's approach the learning objectives are to integrate all media (graphic novels, movies, books, etc.) into the class in an organic method because it will give the students a more complete understanding of the topic, saying that,

Learning objectives are integrated into the general topic that is being taught rather than as a stand alone. It gives students amore nuanced understanding of

the complications of the Middle East and it show them that history is not a linear narrative.

S4 also believes that it is critical for students to understand the formal elements of graphic storytelling in order to better understand the content of the stories. For the classes that she teaches, she selects titles that are memoirs, comic journalism or comic history because these are the stories that most engage the students. She also understands that not every student will take to graphic novels, in order to help insure students' understanding of the content as well as to promote visual literacy, she

finds relevant readings and interpretations of the books. Integrates them into the traditional assignments. I also use of different media, besides graphic novels. My view is that graphic novels are a gateway to other sources and there is at least one form of media that makes sense to each student and will be a conduit to understand different sources.

In order to accomplish this, S4 uses three ways to engage her students:

1. I identify content that aligns with the defined standards of the subject.
2. Selection of panels from books that help students to recognize different perspectives and perceptions. This genre lends itself to that kind of analysis
3. I select panels that engage students visually and textually. I choose panels that will help complicate students understanding of the topic.

It is interesting to see that although she has become a fan of using graphic novels for teaching, S4 never assigns a complete graphic novel, but instead, "selects

individual panels, or one or two pages as the primary source.” These panels accomplish two things: “The panel will visually and textually engage the students, and will also “help students in recognizing different perspectives and perceptions” of the ideas and events that she is teaching. As to the success of this method, she reports that, “After reading a panel or just a couple of pages, students continue to read to complete the books.” S4 also reports that the general student reception of her choices of media, especially graphic novels is very positive, and that the students are engaged and interested in both the content and the work assigned (traditional writing assignments). Regarding the students general interest in graphic novels, she reports that the students are “motivated to learn and continue to explore the genre for other topics.

### **Subject 5**

Subject 5 (S5) is a 39-year-old American male currently teaching ESL at an engineering college in Oman. Previously to this, he spent 4 years in Prague, and two summers in China, also as an ESL teacher. In Oman, he teaches mass communication, literature, English for engineers for all grades, as well as foundation level English. S5 has enjoyed comics from childhood, and says, “that it was a natural fit to use them.” Has he attended and presented at several Comic Cons in Abu Dubai, Germany, England, and other European countries. Regarding the availability of comics in Oman, S5 reports that printed books are difficult to come by, but the students are very open to it, partly because they are used to accessing different media, such as digital games, which S5 says naturally ties in to graphic novels. One needs only to attend one Comic Con to see the validity of that statement. S5’s experience of using graphic novels and comics in an ESL program at a non-native English speaking country has always been positive, and he relates says



that it “Does not matter if the books are in English, they naturally scaffold and put the language learner at ease, because the visuals will help explain the text.”

S5 says that teaching with comics in Oman is rewarding because the students enjoy the material, he is respected and is well liked. But it does have its challenges, such as obtaining appropriate comics, the need for a higher level of cultural sensitivity, and making sure that students acquire a professional level of English proficiency.

As there are no comic stores in Muscat, the capital where he teaches, S5 needs to rely on the Internet along with “friends and colleagues who are up to date on new comics.”

Whenever possible, he purchases sets of comics for his classes, but more often than not, uses books from his own collection, by scanning and printing pages for the students.

Similar to S4, he usually uses single panels or pages, for similar and reasons that will be addressed below. Another challenge is that although all of his students have all studied and reached a minimum English proficiency before coming to college, they have never studied with a native English Speaker. Saying that comics are an excellent tool for teaching English, he reports that

Most of the students have studied English, but their teachers are from Oman, so they have not learned the cadence and nuances of spoken English. The primary objective is to increase their day-to-day language, their professional engineering and technical vocabulary to acclimate and make them comfortable in speaking in natural English language conversation, and to expand their ability to decipher and understand visual clues that address the relationship between text and images.

Compounding this is the fact that for the most part, until the students entered college, they learned to speak English that was not up to grade and professional levels. To remedy this,

the school required an experienced ESL teacher with native English language skills, to bring the students up to par, and to feel comfortable in speaking and writing the language (since students had only learned from Omani teachers. Even with all of their previous English classes, the students enter the school at ground level with basic skills. It is up to the teacher to develop the curriculum to achieve the objectives. Most students enter the school at ground level, so teachers use some criteria selected by the school to increase their professional and spoken language skills and then, builds the curriculum as he sees appropriate.

One of S5's challenges is to then find and acquire the appropriate texts. He relates that

Selections are made that will support the teaching of ESL at a college level course for people who have studied English, but never with a native speaker. Selections need to highlight natural language because many of the engineering students will either travel to America for work, or will work with native English speakers in Oman. Titles and selections need to be totally engaging and even fun like a game, but also challenging so that the students will participate in classes and assignments.

It is critical for teachers there to act with great respect to the Omani cultural sensitivities, especially when teaching. Regarding this, S5 says,

although Oman is a relatively open society, as compared to other countries in the Emirates, it is still conservative, so there is a level of censorship. This requires a higher level of cultural sensitivity than in the USA. Books are selected that pop out, but are not childish, and can be picked apart in the classroom to explain and understand formal elements of the English language. Additionally, not many full books are used, so I use books that I can scan and select individual pages, or more often than not, single panels that demonstrate the vocabulary or grammar that highlights natural language speaking.

This cultural sensitivity not only determines the titles, but also how the teachers use the content. For example, a teacher needs to be extra vigilant if they want to include content of a more political nature, or that content related to social justice or history. It is difficult, but not impossible,

although the government generally frowns on certain titles, I sometimes sneak in a panel of something with a more political nature, such as from *Maus*. As I discuss the use of language with the class, I also contextualize the story and what it means.

In order to achieve the learning objectives set by the school as well as by him, SF developed a modified schedule, a blend of formal and informal learning, and also implemented technology into curriculum. These modifications that address the needs of the students and help insure their success in acquiring language skills. S5 relates that,

the students come to class only two days a week. The other three are spent “liaising with their peers and the instructor English discussions, and to collaborate on formal assignments. Much of the work is based on informal

learning principals because it better engages these particular students. Moodle is used to introduce new comics for reading assignments, and discussions about the material as well as general discussions about the narrative and language.

S5 uses comics in some of the formal learning assignments that he gives to students. For one assignment, students receive pages and panels and then need to evaluate and describe the narrative and/or dialogue. Students look at selected panels without text and need to select passages from a list that best describe the dialogue and narrative. The students need to create a story with stick figures and then explain their reasoning and logic of the narrative.

S5 uses a rigorous system to evaluate the students that address both their formal informal learning assignments. He looks are everything that the students to in the class, such as, quizzes, oral discussions, participation in class as well as Moodle. Additionally, S5 reports that the students response the class and materials is “overwhelmingly positive, even though not all of the reading examples are complete stories,” and that there is a dramatic increase in their

ability to engage in conversations with the teacher and peers, using natural English, proper pronunciation, about a variety of topics such as engineering and technology, sports and other day to day subjects, and are able to take a group of out of sequence panels from a comic and arrange them in the correct order and explain why they did so as well as the meaning of the comics.

## **Subject 6**

Subject 6 (S6) is a 26-year-old American female, and has been a fan of comics since childhood, and has never attended a Comic Con because of cost and distance. In high school, S6

was required to read *Persepolis* for a class and got hooked on graphic novels. She is also very interested in a sub-genre of graphic novels called graphic medicine, which “connotes use of comics in medical education and patient care.”

S6 is proved to be a very interesting subject, as she is the only one of the subjects with experience in teaching at two very different types of schools. Most recently, she was the ESL teacher at a school in a small village on the Thai-Laotian border, and 2 hours away from Chiang Mai, the most culturally significant city in northern Thailand. She was on a one-year contract and at the time of this interview, she was one month from completion. Her students ranged in age from 14-18, and altogether, she taught 600 students throughout the year and used comics and graphic novels in all of her classes. Prior to this, she taught English at an institution for 12-15-year-old male sex offenders, located in Sioux City, Iowa. S6 reports that although clearly troubled, many were very sweet and that she had no problems with behavior. She used comics and graphic novels at both schools.

Each of the schools had its own set of challenges and opportunities. For example, when teaching at the institution, she needed to be hyper vigilant about using comics that featured super heroes that were over sexualized, a common issue in many comics and graphic novels. This is especially apparent in the ways that women were (and still are) illustrated, with skin-tight costumes that accentuate unrealistic physical features that appeal primarily to adolescent males.

Rather than eliminate comics from her classes, S6 identified appropriate titles that were safe and engaged the students. She recounted that, “there were lots of super that I could not use. But, there were also many that I could use, such as Teen Titans (the little kid version), Sonic the Hedgehog, and other titles from the Cartoon Network.”

S6 used comics as a way to help her students feel that they were not completely marginalized and forgotten because they were institutionalized. She understood that the “kids were locked in an institution and saw what other kids [on the outside] were watching and tried to play into that and showed them what they could do.” She assigned the students both writing and drawing exercises, and selected “non-sexualized heroes, and used them to show the kids how to create and look at how comics are drawn, so that they felt free to draw and create their own comics.” The result was very positive and that “the incarcerated kids loved to learn how to draw comics.”

There were different challenges and opportunities for S6 when she taught in Thailand. Her primary learning objectives were selected by the school and were to “promote literacy, hone basic English skills, teach situational English for employment (hospitality, healthcare and building, along with language for daily routines and life changes.” To accomplish this, S6 was given the freedom to structure her classes as she saw fit. She used curriculum and learning assignments that would be familiar in most American schools for ESL classes.

Classes are structured to discuss vocabulary and listening (one day), a speaking day for student dialogues, a day for listening activities with charts, a day of games, such as rearranging words and panels, viewing comics and choosing appropriate responses from a list, and a day to read and make comics strips with dialogue. The main assignments with comics are projects in place of formal midterms and finals. These projects are based on creating comics as well as speaking and listening.

Like students around the world, S6’s students were exposed to English through popular media, but had never formally studied the language, and the Thai English teachers had the same

issue as those in Oman- they did not speak with the natural cadence and accents. S6 selected simple comics to introduce the students to English that they could interpret and understand, reporting, “she choose really simple things, like sample pages from Garfield, and Peanuts. I choose comic strips to communicate what is going on in just a few panels, and that they are already familiar with.” Obtaining the content not an insurmountable issue for S6, as she was able to “Purchase them in the village, as well as download, copy, and distribute complete comics or selected panels.”

Although social justice was not in the curriculum or a learning objective, S6’s sensibility was similar to what S5 does in Oman. While considering the primary learning objective of preparing students for employment S6 she finds ways to incorporate big ideas into her teaching. One way that she accomplishes is through technology. For the more advanced students, she uses iTunes apps to search for web comics from all over the world that had been translated into English. She then

selects comics that are age and language appropriate, with characters that are not over sexualized. I try to select titles that incorporate larger ideas, such as *Persepolis*, *Sirens Lament*, or excerpts from *The Avengers*. I try to find titles that use appropriate vocabulary that can be used in employment and conversation, titles that promote empathy with the experience of being a foreigner, and to help students understand the idea of being a global citizen and respecting other cultures.

S6 believes that ESL is becoming more important in the world to promote literacy and that comics are an important part of ESL language instruction.

S6 relates that she integrates one of the common Thai cultural interests into her curriculum is through drawing, and says simply that “Thai kids love to draw!” Her most popular

and successful assignments are for her students to make their own comics. “If the 600 students that I had, only a few do not draw. For those few, I partner them with someone who does.” She assigns the students different topics for them to write a short 5 or 6 page comic. Topics include things such as family and life cycle events, and life and work experiences. She also continues to integrate her ideas about being a global citizen, and reports that by making comics, she wants them to

create the experience of being in a foreign country, and to make about how it feels to be foreign, so if and when they travel, comics to make stories to see how it feels to be foreign for if and when they travel. These are some of the experiences that will introduce them to the idea of being a global citizen, with global responsibilities, and part of that is respecting other cultures and experiencing how to co-exist with them.

She “teaches them to understand emotion and feelings, and that the students’ needs to act out what they draw so that they can understand.” Sometimes S6 was able to create teachable moments based on students’ questions. For example, Thai people are very concerned with beauty, and consider being thin to be beautiful as well as women’s use of make-up. S6 does not consider herself thin according to Thai standards, and she does not wear make-up. But, they are also very sensitive about the feelings of others. So when some of the students (and teachers made comments about her weight and lack of make-up, S6 gently pointed out that her feelings were hurt and the students apologized. She then turned this into an assignment, and reports that

students engaged and asked questions about larger ideas that promote empathy.

The students’ questions such as, Teacher, do you feel like this increased their level of global understanding and respecting cultural differences, and how to co-exist in different cultures. Thai kids have a very specific sense of beauty that



includes being thin and women wearing make-up. I am not super thin and do not wear makeup, so students asked me why I am fat and not pretty. I explained that in my country, I am not considered fat or ugly. Students then made comics about this idea, their feelings about it and how they shifted their perception about how other people think about beauty.

### **Additional Significance of the Data**

While the author harbored no assumptions that there would be one or more commonalities in the responses, the author was surprised to learn that visual literacy was the only clear reason that was shared by all six of the research subjects. Each teacher explained described their own reasons for promoting visual literacy, yet the practical application in their teaching and classrooms is as unique as the individuals. For example, S1 uses complete graphic novels in Spanish to teach students about the political struggles in Argentina, Chile and other South American countries. She says, “books are not stand alone and are all part of a thematic course, and that they need to be grounded in how to do visual literacy, the evolution of iconic images.” On the other hand, S4 uses individual panels, or perhaps a single page because “The panel will visually and textually engage the students, and will also “help students in recognizing different perspectives and perceptions” of the ideas and events that she is teaching,” adding “that graphic novels are a gateway to other sources and there is at least one form of media that makes sense to each student and will be a conduit to understand different sources.” This last comment applies Gardner’s (2000) theory about multiple intelligences, directly into the classroom. S4 essentially is saying that different students have different ways of learning, and absorbing content, and that graphic novels are one of the tools that can be used for visual thinkers.

About using graphic novels, S2 says that students “need engaging ways to learn because they are living in a visual society,” and that graphic novels help teach students to think critically, visually and to “keep an open mind in a creative way, to think visually (which they already do, all day), and to think in alternative ways (besides traditional text).” In the interview, S5 said that graphics were also a powerful way to help students remember text, and says, “students recognized that they would remember context and text better if paired with an image.” Also, whether reading a complete book, or just a panel, the “panel selections help students in recognizing different perspectives. Using graphic novels helps students to identify and understand different perspective and perceptions of the same thing” (more about this later). S4 says that part of the power of graphic novels in the context of her history classes is the, “increased visual literacy, better understanding of the complexities and nuances of the middle east, as well as increasing the ability to analyze different media and their impact on learning and understanding.”

Contemporary society around the world is very visual, filled with dynamic images in movies, phones, magazines, billboards, monitors, games, and just about everything connected to every individual’s day-to-day life, and displayed 24/7 nearly everywhere on the planet (although there are still some remote, completely off-the-grid communities around the world). We know that a large part of it is the ability to sort through the chaff of daily visuals; identifying and editing what one sees in order analyze, evaluate and find meaning and understanding. Although all of the research subjects acknowledge the importance of critical and visual thinking, and that graphic novels and comics are critical in helping students acquire these critical skills, none of them addressed the different aspects of how comics actually influence the cognitive development of visual thinking. Although S2 reported that when teaching *The Pride of Baghdad*, he not only

teaches the narrative, but also teaches the formal visuals in a unique way, focusing on the relationship between colors, art, and layout with the story itself.

An additional benefit of graphic novels as it relates to visual literacy is that they are in a media and genres that learners are already familiar with, and can help bring them to classic literature. S2 says, “and for us to keep thinking about current kids who can’t be far away from their cell phones, for us to expect that they will read Tale of two cities as a book is completely outdated.” Graphic novels are for comic natives- people who already are familiar with and fans of the genre.

Even though visual thinking is the only common idea shared by the all of the teachers, there are associative threads that can infer other commonalities. For example among the four non-ESL teachers, graphic novels are also an excellent tool for promoting text-based literacy and a love of reading. S2, the high school teacher from Chicago, reported that, “We are creating readers. Many of these kids never checked a book out of the library, but they need these other books (continuing the series) to keep reading the story.” S3 echoes this, saying that comics are used primarily to increase student literacy and love of reading and to drive them to become part of the culture of literacy and empower the students to ask questions about the text and to pass on their newly acquired love of reading to their peers.

Graphic novels are a dynamic and clever way to get students to recognize visual and textual thinking, as well as the power of words. S3 says that students are, “talking about words the entire school year, but now are talking about how they relate to accompanying images,” which is actually one of the steps in teaching critical visual thinking. In talking about books, S3 says that comics, “create the same thing in a unique ways and get them thinking about how writing existed in other forms from what they know.”

At the outset of this work, the author had a pre-determined understanding of the definition of social justice and how it is pursued. But the literature, graphic novels and but especially the teachers demonstrated that there are actually many ways of understanding social justice and how to approach it in educational settings. For example, the approach to social justice by S1 and S4 was traditional, using graphic novels to talk about social and political events, such as in South America or the Middle East. These two teachers assigned both full readings of books, as well as individual panels and pages about famous and true events and actions. This material was used for class discussions about the history of the event, points of views of the characters in the story, and the authors if the book. The class assignments of S1 and S4 were also fairly traditional class work of writing essays and analysis of the books. S2, S3, S5, and S6 all viewed text and visual literacy as important components of social justice. As previously mentioned, S3 advocates comics as a gateway to reading and literacy, and says that they. “are great tools for cognitive development of young thinker and readers,” continuing that, “reading drives them to be part of the culture of literacy” as well as critical engagement in society. As mentioned earlier, S4 believes that graphic novels help increase students’ “visual literacy and a better understanding of the complexities and nuanced of the history and current events in the Middle East.” This then helps students to not judge too quickly and to try to understand the issues is a way that can lead them to promote ideas and actions that will provide social justice to all of the residents there.

Although minimal, S5 must deal with state censorship because of his location. This does not allow him to openly assign books and stories that deal with human rights and social justice. But, using his skills and experience as a teacher, he does assign individual panels from books such as *Maus* to use as discussion points in much larger class discussions that include social justice. Oman is a small country, and many of the citizens do not travel abroad or have a global

perspective. The opportunity simply does not exist for them. S5 does say that the society is pacifist, so that he “plays with a soft hand, introducing things with a smile as an uncle, as opposed to an authoritarian.” Through teaching ESL, S5 has the opportunity to promote literacy, as well as introduce a segment of society to issues such as common problems that face all global citizens.

In Chapter 4, S6 described how she addressed one aspect of social justice in her ESL classes. Stating that “although sexism is alive and well in Thailand, the students are open to different ideas.” Selecting books such as *Teen Titans*, that toned down the sexuality of the characters, she was able to guide the students to focus on normal rather than hyper-sexualized comic book characters. The results were that in classroom discussions, the students asked her if she was offended by their previous comments (Teacher, why are you fat?), and apologized. In these lessons, S6 tried to “create the experience of what it feels like being a foreigner in a different country.” Although this may not resonate for the Thai children in their own country, S6 taught them about “being a global citizen, with global responsibilities, and part of that is respecting other cultures and understanding and experiencing how to exist with other cultures,” summarizing this idea by saying that ESL “teaches language as well as global citizenship.”

Although Chapter 4 showed that aside from promoting visual literacy, there is an explicit lack of common ground that describes the reasons that teachers use graphic novels and comic books. Nonetheless, it is possible to see some similarities that weave their way through the teacher’s responses, such as: graphic novels and comics promote a love of reading and are a gateway to reading traditional literature; the genre is completely engaging to the students; and they promote different aspects of social justice, from reading about historical events to learning about new and different cultures.

Despite this apparent lack of commonality among the research subjects, there are two important attributes of using comics that are implicit in all of the teachers' responses- passion and commitment. Even though both terms describe most teachers, there are special attributes associated with teachers who use comics and graphic novels. For example, the data showed that although not all of the teachers are life-long fans of the genre, they are all very passionate about the genre, and believe in the power and relevancy of using comics and graphic novels in their teaching. They go out of their way to find content that is relevant and appropriate for their students. There are no standards for teaching with comics, no common core, no list of approved titles (although *Maus* and *Persepolis* were mentioned by several of the teachers), or even the kinds of assignments they give to their students, but they invest hours of additional, personal time to prepare for their classes. The teachers did all mention that they do receive moral support, and a lot of freedom from their administration, and even assistance for procuring content. But for the most part, it is up to the teachers themselves to prepare curriculum, lesson plans and to identify and acquire appropriate content. These same qualities also describe the teachers' commitment to teaching with comics. Providing comics from their personal collections, downloading content from the Internet, reaching out to colleagues and peers for suggestions, and advising the procurement specialists about titles are but some of the activities that these teachers engage in to insure that students have the materials that they require, and the results substantial, as demonstrated by the high level of student engagement with the actual materials, their increased reading levels and the measured development of their critical thinking skills.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

It is important to remember that comic books and graphic novels are a relatively new media for classrooms, and until fairly recently, have been primarily associated with entertainment. Examples in Chapter 2 showed that journalists and teachers had fairly negative opinions of the medium, especially as a form of literature, as well as for their use in education and learning. Even though the books by It was only after the publication of Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980) did critics and educators began to recognize the unique qualities of this media, especially in education. Since that time, new titles exploring critical historical events, cultures and communities as well as literature about the genre have appeared in bookstores, libraries and Amazon.

At the onset of this research, it was the intent of author to learn why teachers choose to teach history, sociology, literature and other subjects with graphic novels in their classes, rather than traditional textbooks. Through readings and interviews, the author observed that, other than to promote visual literacy, there is no single, unifying reason or commonality for teachers to use comics and graphic novels in their classes. Yet, the readings described in Chapter 2 and data from Chapter 4, suggest that there is implicit common ground, based upon the teachers' sensibilities to their work, original decision to use comics, as well as implied in some of their responses.

### **The Power of Comics in Learning and Training**

Graphic novels are excellent media to address difficult narratives that are emotionally powerful. It is an interesting thought experiment to compare the difference between reading a graphic novel to watching a video, especially for emotionally charged content. For instance, *The Torture Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (Jacobson & Colón, 2017) was recently published

explicitly to translate a Senate intelligence committee report on torture used in prisoners of the ‘war on terrorism.’ In the forward to the book, New York Times reporter, Jane Mayer describes the history of the report, from its inception in February 2009, to its release, six years later. Culled from

six million pages of CIA documents, the resulting report is a model of government accountability. So far only the 525-page summary of the full 6,770-page report has been publicly released but it provide one of the most unsparing airings of misconduct, bungling, deception and depravity by America’s secret intelligence service ever to be shared with the American public. (Jacobson & Colón, 2017, p. VIII)

The full report as well as the summary find that the use of torture is an abject failure. Yet, as Meyer continues, there has concerted effort made by supporters of torture, to downplay and disavow the report, such as former vice president Dick Cheney who said that the report is “full of crap” (Jacobson & Colón, 2017, p. VIII). It is the authors belief that in order to change bad policy, we must first be educated about it, as Meyers also writes, “The more who learn the truth, the better off the country will be, because there is no better safeguard against the revival of torture than a well-informed public” (Jacobson & Colón, 2017, p. IX).

Similar things can also be said about the other books that address difficult issues such as racism, sexism, and war that face our world today. Graphic novels are an excellent and powerful genre that engage, entertain and most important for this report, educate people about these and other critical issues.

Several things come to mind when comparing the experience of reading a graphic novel to watching any movie, whether actual or dramatized. Watching a dramatic recreation of a horrible event in a movie has the benefit of images and sound, and is effective in simulating an



experience, but I think that the effect passes, unless the viewer has been subject to that kind of event. In this case, the images and sound can stimulate and awaken suppressed memories that can trigger Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Even though we the viewers know that the people on the screen are only actors, and we all know that after the director says cut, these actors get up and walk away. But the triggers can cause intense reactions to actual survivors. The opening sequence of the movie *Saving Private Ryan* affected so many WWII veterans that many theaters provided therapists and consolers to help them cope after the movie. It was a powerful film, but very difficult to watch.

A graphic novel tells the story with text and images, but without stimulating other senses such as sound. A book provides a visual context for the words so that readers can pace themselves in order to not get overwhelmed with the content. The illustrations provide enough information to make strong, emotional impact, without overwhelming the reader, while the text gives an accurate running commentary describing the horrible activities taking place. As a book, the reader can remain on a page, or move around in a non-linear manner. The impact of this is actually quite powerful, and can remain with the reader far longer than a movie.

It is interesting that neither the research subjects nor the literature addressed research about many of the other practical (as well as theoretical) benefits of using graphic novels in learning environments. For example, the form of a comic book is nearly identical to the storyboards used in movies, television, theater, websites, and even corporate presentations. In instructing students how to make comics, teachers are also providing students with a valuable skillset that is becoming more in demand. Students learn how to create dynamic compositions, transitions from one scene to the next, lighting cues and more. These same kinds of skills are also applicable for creating training tutorials for teaching people practical procedures, such as

installing software, or replacing a part in a car. Training videos are good for conceptual projects, but panel-by-panel illustrated tutorials (in the form of a comic) are an excellent media for mechanical training procedures that require the trainee about hard-to-find locations of parts or switches, installing software or changing a vacuum bag.

### **Comics Now**

Chapter 3 showed that last year, the overall sales of comic books and graphic novels reached \$579.12 million, up by nearly \$40 million from the previous year, and that over the past decade, the sales of comic books and graphic novels have increased between 20-30 million dollars a year (Comic Book Sales by Year, n.d.). The manner in which the numbers are tracked make it very difficult to identify specific titles, publishers or genre, but the numbers are consistent across all of the tracking institutions. It is possible to extrapolate from this, that along with popular titles (such as the Marvel Universe) there has also been a yearly increase in graphic novels and comics that address issues about social justice and identity are used in educational environments. Along with the increase in graphic novels and comics, there has also been an increase in the number of books and scholarly articles about graphic novels and comics.

But these numbers do not account for the increase of Web comics or other online distribution methods. This increase has stimulated a growth in independent and alternative comics that skirt much of the cost, complexity and bureaucracy of the larger, established publishing companies. To counter this many writers are becoming self-publishers, such as Parker and Calderon's (2015) book, *Black Fist and Brown Hand: Ready to Offend*. Others are turning to the web, and web comics, such as Mohamed, the 21-year old Egyptian writer who has been producing her graphic novel, *Qahera* exclusively as a web comic, in English and Arabic for global audience. This is made possible by the ease and cost of technology to produce and

distribute outside of the realm of traditional publishers and distributors. Independent distributors are beginning to capitalize on the growing interest in comics, developing online publishing and distribution sites. Also, publishers and distributors are developing mechanisms for independent artists to self-publish books and online comics; for example, Amazon and Kindle developed Amazon Direct Publishing to publish books and graphic novels for free. This gives authors more freedom for creating, as well as opens up new markets for distribution.

Comics and graphic novels are not alone in benefiting from the upsurge in titles and interest. As discussed in Chapter 2, comics and graphic novels have made great progress since critics and educators have written in the past that graphic novels and comics were not serious literature, worthy of formal study, or to examine critical issues. Each year over the past 15 years has seen an increase in the number of articles in many different scholarly journals, reporting on research studies looking at graphic novels as serious literature, history, gender studies, and even education. Augmenting this is the increase in books about comic books- both scholarly and popular. Studies have been conducted on a wide range of important topics relevant to this dissertation. *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* by Aldama (2010), *Creating Comics as Journalism, Memoir, and Nonfiction* by Duncan, Taylor and Stoddard (2016), and *Comics Confidential: Thirteen Graphic Novelists Talk About Story, Craft and Life Outside the Box* edited by Marcus (2016) are just three of the books that were important and influential reads during the author's research.

Along with the surge of distributors of comics and graphic novels in brick-and-mortar, and online bookstores, more and more libraries are not only growing the size of their collections, they are also appointing (or hiring) specialty librarians for comics and graphic novels. For example, Marilyn Taniguchi, the Library Services Manager at Beverly Hills Public Library is

responsible for their collection. She said that the library started to expand their collection from described the growth of their collection in the late 1990's and now has 2,458 books. She stated that,

the adult collection of graphic novels was given its own location in the Library in the early 2000s and now contains 1,254 graphic novels, while there are 1,011 graphic novels in J Graphic Novel collection, and 1,203 graphic novels in J Teen Graphic Novels. Hoopla is another library resource (used by the Los Angeles Public Library, as well as in other communities) that provides comic books, and graphic novels for Kindle and as PDF files, as well as streaming video, audio, and books for the general public.

The increased interest in using comics and graphic novels for education is not limited to the United States. There are scholars and researchers around the world adding to the knowledge base about graphic novels in education. Over the past year, the author connected with and had conversations not related to this dissertation with three of them: Iria Ros Piñeiro, a doctoral candidate from Valencia, Spain, but studying in Krakow, Poland is researching the use of graphic novels to teach European History; Lars Wallner, a doctoral student at in Sweden is writing his dissertation on using comic as a resource for educational interaction between students as well as students and teachers; and Sarah Lightman (2014) author of *Graphic Details: Jewish Women's Confessional Comics in Essays and Interviews*, at the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Glasgow, is currently researching Dressing Eve and other Reparative Acts in Women's Traumatic Autobiographical Comics.

Recent interest and development about graphic novels and education has been made possible by the Internet, which has stimulated global communication between writers, artists, distributors, publishers and fans. These connections have led to multiple fan organizations that

meet online (and in real life) to discuss and argue about recent issues of their favorite comics. The Internet also fosters communication and collaboration between scholars, researchers and students as exemplified by the ComixScholars Discussion List, whose listserv that is hosted by the University of Florida English Department. The best, most accurate and informative description of ComixScholars is found on its website, stating that it is

an academic forum that serves the interests of those involved in research, criticism and teaching related to comics art. All aspects of comics and cartooning from around the world are open for discussion. Likewise, we welcome theoretical and critical approaches from all disciplinary perspectives. Academic scholars, people working in other institutional frameworks, and independent scholars are all equally welcome to contribute. The list's common ground is its foundation in scholarship and its willingness to examine all the givens of comics' form, culture, and history. It is a place to debate theoretical and historical issues; to post course syllabi and assignments; to call attention to potentially useful scholarship and other resources; and to post calls for submissions for books, journals, and conferences. The list is also a forum for discussing job searches, pedagogy, library acquisitions, financial resources, and other institutional factors that affect comics' scholarship. The list is intended to focus on the means and ends of scholarship, and our discussions will venture far afield from the immediate interests of most casual comics fans.

This list is an excellent resource, daily publishing multiple discussions, questions, and announcements from members from all around the world (this is where the author found the research subjects for this work). This discussion list is also a Community of Practice, as described by Wenger's (2008) web-based writing "people congregate in virtual spaces and

develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests” (p. 7), this Listserv is a place used by individuals (scholars), communities (individuals interested in comics), and organizations (the institutions that sponsor the individuals).

### **The Future**

The research data show that apart from visual literacy, there was little explicit common ground for the teachers’ reasons to use comics in the classroom (especially to teach social justice). There are other benefits, such as teaching a love of reading, critical thinking, and ESL and language development. The literature suggests that graphic novels can be used to teach a wide range of subjects such as history, literature, social studies, current events, introductory statistics, basic medical procedures and care, and more. Yet current research tends to be topic-centric, and with the exception of Wallner’s research on about using comics as resources for educational interactions, there are few (if any) books that specifically relate to formal educational studies, such as educational theory, curriculum development, learning outcomes, comics’ impact on the cognitive development of students, assessment, standards, and other associated topics. Barab et al.’s (2010) research discussed in Chapter 3 showed similarities between game design and graphic novels, but they are just that- similarities, and not the same medium. Both have their place in education, just as all manner of media through the ages have been used, but they are both very different from each other. Games are dynamic, interactive activities, often played collaboratively in a group, with sounds, video, sometimes motion, and other devices to stimulate the senses. Graphic novels are not. They are created for an individual to remain sedentary, with few stimulations, or simulations, where the most activity happens in the readers’ imagination. These differences are the same described in Jenkin’s work on transmedia. Two different

experiences that address the different needs and expectations of different kinds of learners, when combined together, present a more complete story or learning experience.

The literature also shows that graphic novels and comics are also different from traditional books. Books rely solely on the imagination and mind's eye to describe the visuals and actions of any narrative. Each reader creates their own unique experience or movie in their minds. Although there are books that have very visually descriptive, visuals become very nuanced, based on the experience, knowledge and imagination of the viewer. On the other hand graphic novels are just that – graphics. The illustrations provide markers for the reader to contextualize the characters, local, and action according to the vision of the author and artist. The readers continue to actively use their imagination when considering sounds, physical sensations (heat, cold, wind, etc.), and pacing, but only after seeing the visual hints and clues of the author.

There are two very different experiences, two ways of looking at the story, and two ways of interpreting the narrative. Transmedia states that together, they create a more complete experience for the user. Academia is already deep into research about the benefits of using different types of games in different learning environments for different kind of learners, looking at cognitive development, social and emotional impact, and other critical factors. One of the important benefits of using comics is that they are cheaper to produce, and distribute, which means that they are more available to more students than computer games.

The data show a clear trend of continued growth of comics and graphic novels in the marketplace, which means that comics are not going away and that we can expect to see more comics in more classes in different kinds learning environments. It would very beneficial to

adapt the research objectives and projects that used in game-based learning research and adapt it for comics and graphic novels. Future research and action projects can include:

- A much wider, more inclusive survey of teachers already using graphic novels and comics to obtain more details to identify classes taught, grade levels, books, curriculum, learning objectives, and evaluations in order to create a baseline for understanding the what and how;
- Research into the specifics of the previous topics to determine commonalities and criteria for identifying best practices;
- Identify and evaluate schools and districts that already require reading specific titles. What are the titles are read, why were they chosen, what are the learning objectives and subjects taught. (For example, in 2016 the New York City Public Schools added March by John Lewis to their Social Studies curriculum;
- Research on comics and graphic novels effects on cognitive development of students at different class levels;
- Research to determine if comics can actually influence peoples sensitivities to issues pertaining to social justice;
- Research how comics actually influence the cognitive development of visual thinking;
- Identify titles and topics of books that promote social justice and issues of identity, to determine appropriateness for grade levels and class subjects;
- Replication of the Graphic Journeys project in other school systems, to encourage students to share and compare family histories;



- Global collaborations for creating and sharing comics about different cultures and communities. (The author has collaborated with teachers and educators in Siberia, Israel and Mongolia in the past, and all have expressed an interest in pursuing this idea).

## **Final Reflections**

In his movie *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* about the prehistoric drawings found in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in southern France, Herzog shows that pictorial narrative has been on this planet for at least 32,000 years. Cave and rock paintings, bas-relief sculpture, hieroglyphics and even early alphabets were all based on image-based narrative and are found in every corner of the world where there are or have been human beings. In many ways, image-based stories are part of a global language. If we take this into consideration, it is not difficult to understand the reasoning behind the decision to place a plaque with images of two humans on the Pioneer 10 spacecraft. Images are used to tell stories, teach practical actions, and communicate with others when common language does not exist. The author remembers an incident that occurred in the northern Golan Heights when serving in the Israeli Army. He met a Druze shepherd who attempted to communicate in Arabic, a language the author does not speak. The author handed the shepherd a pen and paper and the man drew a series of basic images, communicating that a group of his sheep had wandered off, and if the author had seen them. The author was unable to help the shepherd, but realized that every picture does tell a story.

Understanding the history of image-based narrative helps explain why students, why people are drawn to comics. These stories can be used to engage learners of all ages and of all languages, to educate individuals, and communities about the evil as well as the good that humans are capable.

It seems that in the current state of this country, and the rest of world, there is push to build walls to separate people from each other, to divide and separate communities, and promote a general fear of the other. Although there are those who may support these actions, this author does not, and believes that the physical and metaphorical walls are artificial barriers to understanding and accepting of different cultures. Comics and graphic novels can help people share stories in non-threatening ways, so that we can all better understand each other, In *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, Leonard Rifas, a teacher at Seattle Central Community College writes,

the idea that comics could influence readers, cause damage, or have importance follows from the principal that media both reflect and affect the wider society. They do, but not in a simple, mechanical way. Comics supply evidence of widely shared assumptions and also teach particular ways of looking at things. (Aldama, 2010, p. 27)

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## APPENDIX A

### Participation Request

Dear [Name],

I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Technology at Pepperdine University. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, I am conducting a study on instructors who have used graphic novels in their classes to address issues pertaining to social justice. [Your name was suggested to me by [informant or colleague]]. I hope you will consider contributing to this research. If you are interested, I ask that you complete a brief preliminary questionnaire to determine whether you are a good fit for the study.

If you are selected to participate in this study, your participation will require a 1 to 1 1/2 hour interview, which will take place online using Skype video calling. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experience using graphic novels in your curriculum- the titles selected, learning objectives, the types of assignments and your methods for evaluating the students.

Other requirements: Prior to the scheduled interview, I will ask participants to share with me copies of, or access to, course materials from before and after the transition for one course. In addition, participants will need to have the Skype application installed on a computer, and have an account set up with the service. They will also need a webcam and microphone.

Your participation in this research would be completely voluntary. All identifying information will be removed from the study before presentation or publication, and your documentation and identity will be kept in strict confidence. The findings of this study may benefit other instructors who use or wish to use graphic novels in their classrooms. . As such, your participation in the study will contribute to the scholarship on undergraduate instruction.

Please review the attached consent form before replying. Your emailed agreement to contribute to the study will constitute your consent to be a part of the research described therein. Also, please take a few minutes to complete the brief questionnaire attached and return it to me by [date] with your emailed agreement if you are willing and able to contribute to the study.

Let me know if you have any questions or concerns you would like to discuss before deciding whether to contribute. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

David Greenfield

## APPENDIX B

### IRB Approval



Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

#### NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: June 20, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: David Greenfield

Protocol #: 16-05-290

Project Title: BEYOND SUPER HEROES AND TALKING ANIMALS: A CRITICAL LOOK AT USING GRAPHIC NOVELS TO EXPLORE IDENTITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND OTHER CRITICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear David Greenfield:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson