



The Evolution of Teaching with Graphic Novels

—Janette Hughes with Laura Morrison

Much has changed since I began teaching in a Pre-service Teacher Education program in 2006. Back then, when I introduced our future elementary and secondary English Language Arts teachers to graphic novels, only a few students in each class had any experience with them. Most of the teacher candidates knew about and had read comics at some point in their lives, but only a few had actually read a graphic novel. Now, eight years later, almost all of them know what a graphic novel is, and some enter my classes having taken university courses in the area.

Despite the growing popularity of graphic novels, however, there are still those who enter our program who have never read one, and none of the novice teachers in my courses has ever read one for a course in high school. In a recent M.Ed. graduate courses I taught on digital literacies, an experienced educator and teacher librarian in the group commented that there is certainly still “a reluctance to accepting the graphic novel as a ‘worthy’ read.” As a teacher

librarian, I hear this all the time when teachers bring their classes in the library to get books. Of course I always suggest graphic novels for students, only to hear from their teacher that they have to read a ‘real’ book” (Mulcaster). Recognizing the power and the potential of using graphic novels with students, this teacher librarian is now building a school library collection of graphic novels and manga, purchasing sets of graphic novels to be included as options in grade-level novel studies, running trivia challenges related to manga and anime characters and storylines in these books for the students and teachers in the learning commons, and connecting with the local public library in the form of related book talks. As this educator’s experience demonstrates, the inclusion of graphic novels in elementary and secondary classrooms has been a very slow process, but the fact that progress is being made is evident from the growing numbers of graphic novels being targeted to the educational market.

As a result of this reluctance to accept graphic novels as “legitimate” reading materials for students, the reading of graphic novels has been largely an out-of-school endeavour for many. There have been some shifts in the literary world, however, that have started to change the way graphic novels are being received. First, movie versions are popularizing graphic novels like Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, Frank Miller’s *Sin City* and *300*, and Bryan Lee O’Malley’s *Scott Pilgrim’s Precious Little Life* and its sequels. Second, more people are promoting the validity of graphic novels. In 2008, for the first time, a graphic novel was nominated for a Governor General’s Literary Award in the Children’s (Text) category. *Skim*, a beautiful coming-of-age story written by Mariko Tamaki and illustrated by Jillian Tamaki, is a lovely blend of words and drawings, although only Mariko Tamaki, who penned the words, was nominated. This met with outcry from the graphic novel community, led by popular graphic novelists Seth and Chester Brown, who published a letter criticizing the decision to exclude Jillian Tamaki as co-author: “The text of a graphic novel cannot be separated from its illustrations because the words and the pictures together are the text” (“Top”). Another noteworthy example was the support Jeff Lemire’s graphic novel *Essex County* received from Sara Quin of the indie-pop band Tegan and Sara in the 2011 Canada Reads contest. Unfortunately, *Essex County* was voted off in the first round, which may

be indicative of the limited degree to which graphic novels have been accepted in the literary world by Canadian readers. Finally, graphic novels like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, which deal with serious social and political issues, have caught the eye of the academic world. Individuals within this sphere have come to recognize the depth and critical nature of these texts. There is even a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) offered through Coursera entitled “Comic Books and Graphic Novels.”

Graphic Novels in Education

Based on my own experiences, observations, and scan of the scholarly research in this area about the use of graphic novels in education over the past eight years, it is clear that the graphic novel has been largely accepted as a vehicle for reaching struggling readers and students new to the English language in both elementary and secondary school contexts. Graphic novels have been used to engage struggling readers and to induct them into the classroom learning community (Yang). The inherent multimodal nature of this form, which combines text and image and asks readers to interpret or “read” other non-linguistic elements such as frames and “camera” angles, allows struggling readers to draw on literacy skills beyond the linguistic. This is true as well for English Language Learners (ELLs), who may not have all the necessary vocabulary for reading longer or more challenging print texts but



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who may still have strong literacy skills in their own languages. We know from previous studies (see Cummins, *Negotiating*; Cummins, “Evidence”) that it is extremely important not to exclude the creative and critical pieces in ELL educational practices, as these pieces aid language acquisition and the development of literacy skills. Too often, teachers struggle to engage ELLs in critical and higher-order thinking tasks; the graphic novel can be an instrument to promote reading fluency and comprehension. Because graphic novels promote multiple modes of expression or “dual pathways” (see Hughes and King), they can facilitate entry points for ELLs to participate as literate members of the classroom community, even if those readers do not yet possess the same level of language or literacy skills as their mainstream peers. The more ELLs can be involved, the more they will be encouraged to continue to participate in class, develop their skills, and build their social presence. D. Randy Garrison defines social presence as the “ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (352).

Development of Literacy Skills

In this research involving graphic novels, I worked with students from grades three to eleven in the Durham region of Ontario along with Laura Morrison, also a former public school teacher and currently a part-time lecturer at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. In our research, we used graphic novels to help

students practise and to refine the following literacy skills: analyzing and synthesizing multiple streams of simultaneous information; making connections and predictions based on text and images; making inferences across the gutters (the space between the panels) as they moved from one image to the next; visualizing their story and building a visual world for their own panels; writing concisely, summarizing, and arranging their story into sequential panels with limited space for either text or images; showing instead of telling. We also worked on identifying key visual and textual features of graphic novels such as splash pages, types of panels (overlapping, floating, full-page), word balloons, captions, location of action, depth of field, and point of view. We presented the students with a page of panels and asked them to deconstruct what is happening and to explore a number of questions concerning how certain messages are conveyed and how authors/illustrators use different angles and shots to create specific effects. Some of the activities included an analysis of the visual components in a very detailed set of panels, and the ways in which the visual components work with the textual components to create layers of meaning. We asked students to write short narratives based on panels with the text removed or to fill in the speech bubbles or caption boxes in a set of panels to create a unique character voice. All of these activities have helped teachers work with students at various levels.

Our primary focus has been on the unique ways that graphic novels convey messages, and in our current work with students in grades six to eight, we are exploring pedagogical approaches that combine learning *about* graphic novels with learning *from* graphic novels. In K–12 education, this is a shift that is still very much in its infancy, but this focus is important and indicative of the changing social and academic landscape.

A Critical Digital Literacies Approach

In light of the emergence of more graphic novels oriented around issues of social justice, we have been using this medium in our research to explore issues around global citizenship, human rights, democracy, and access to education. In our critical digital literacies research, we have explored the impact on adolescents' learning when given opportunities to create digital texts for a wider audience and to engage with social justice issues on a global scale (see Hughes and Morrison). This research positions adolescents as agents of change as they produce digital texts based on issues identified through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, such as the impact of war, child labour, poverty, and environmental concerns. As an introduction to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we used a comic book version available through UNICEF and had students in grades six to eight storyboard and produce stop-motion animation segments based on each of

the articles in the Convention. In an examination of the impact of war on children around the world, we used the graphic novel *The Photographer*, a record of photojournalist Didier Lefèvre's journey through war-torn Afghanistan. Lefèvre's photos are juxtaposed with the art of Emmanuel Guibert, and together these images recount the experiences of members of a Doctors without Borders team.

In the next section, we share a recent case study of how graphic novels can be used to explore the history of colonization in Canada through a unit that integrates social studies content, the development of traditional and digital literacy skills, and the exploration of equity and social justice. The study was conducted in two locations in downtown Oshawa, Ontario: the new Digital Literacies Lab in the UOIT Faculty of Education and the students' own classroom. Our lab is equipped with two Mac minis, a SmartBoard, a digital projector, two microphones with voice-recording capabilities, iPads, and MacBook Pro laptops. When the students were in their classroom, they had access to their iPads, eight laptops, and three desktop PCs. These resources are notable because the Faculty of Education at UOIT is situated in a low-income, low-education region where only 10% of the population has attended university and only 30% has a high-school education. One of our mandates is to bring the resources, strengths, skills, and expertise of our faculty directly to bear on the "digital divide" evidenced in low socio-

economic status (SES), high-needs local schools to assist them in improving the educational successes of their students. The middle-school students we worked with were part of a special education program for students who are clients of a government-approved care, treatment, or correctional facility.

The study had a total of four boys and four girls between the ages of eleven and twelve. All eight students had been identified with a variety of cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and developmental exceptionalities, including Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, various learning disabilities, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Most of the students were also living in some form of group or foster care. In addition, the students had a range of experience with and access to technology and different digital tools, both at home and in school from previous grades. All the students knew basic Internet skills, like searching for videos on YouTube; they did not have fine-tuned digital or critical literacy skills, such as how to analyze digital texts or graphic novels for deeper meaning and understanding. All the students had marked gaps in their learning and in their general knowledge of the world.

The classroom teacher, Karen Hedges, had thirteen years of teaching experience and ten years of experience working with this demographic of students in this specialized program. While she did not have extensive experience with technology, she was open

to learning new programs and working with the researchers and teacher candidates to integrate a variety of digital tools into her classroom pedagogy. Eight teacher candidates from our Faculty of Education volunteered to conduct one-on-one meetings with these students over a two-month period. During this tutoring period of the study, the teacher candidates worked with the students on their iPads and laptops and helped them synthesize the content of the classroom lessons and create multimodal texts with the digital tools.

Research Design and Process

Through an integrated arts-based curriculum, with a thematic focus on community and identity, the students learned about historical and modern indigenous issues. The students, one of whom self-identifies as part indigenous, were first introduced to indigenous cultures and histories through Chad Solomon and Christopher Meyer's graphic novel series *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws*. They also participated in a smudging ceremony led by a local Anishnaubek elder and read two additional indigenous-themed novels: Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's *Fatty Legs*, which deals with the residential schools system, and Ben Mikaelson's *Touching Spirit Bear*, which deals with indigenous circle justice.

The Seven Teachings of the Grandfather

In this study, we used the Rabbit and Bear Paws graphic novel series to teach the students about various historical and current indigenous issues. The series, set in eighteenth-century colonized North America, currently includes five texts based on the indigenous teachings of the Seven Grandfathers, a set of teachings in indigenous cultures that vary across First Nations groups: "Depending on what part of Turtle Island (North America) you are from, the different animals may represent different teachings. . . . There are many different descriptions of the Seven Grandfather Teachings and all are correct" ("Seven"). The teachings, which are intended as a guide or foundation for human interaction and conduct, are based on the following seven virtues one should strive for in order to live a fruitful, positive, and purposeful existence: wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth.

In all five graphic novels, readers follow the story of two mischievous Ojibwa brothers as they play pranks on others and have a variety of adventures using a traditional Ojibwa medicine that transforms them into animals for a short time. Chad Solomon uses the teachings thematically in the Rabbit and Bear Paws series by basing each graphic novel on one of the seven teachings. For example, the first novel in the series, subtitled *The Sugar Bush*, focuses on respect. In this story, Rabbit and Bear Paws get into mischief and embark on a journey where they encounter a troop of



Figure 1: A collaborative storytelling activity pertaining to *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws: The Sugar Bush*.

British soldiers who do not speak Ojibwa and need help navigating and existing on this new land. Through the story, Solomon explores not only the issues surrounding colonialism and the first encounter but also indigenous cultures, teachings, and values.

Reading the Rabbit and Bear Paws Series

To introduce the students to indigenous cultures in the Canadian context, geography, and history (with a

specific focus on colonialism), we started the unit with the graphic novel *Adventures of Rabbit and Bear Paws: The Sugar Bush*. Before we began, we asked students what they had learned previously about indigenous peoples in Canada. All the students responded that they had heard of indigenous peoples from previous grades, though based on their unspecific answers regarding what they learned it was obvious that they had either forgotten the information or had not fully

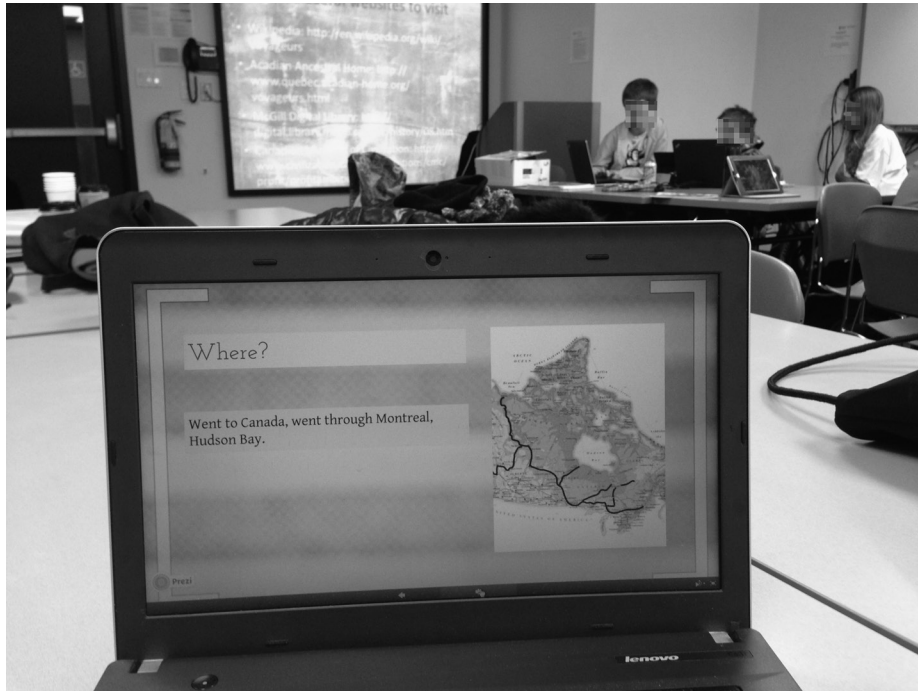


Figure 2: Web quest activity based on the voyageurs.

internalized what had been presented in previous classes. In order to engage the students and to make the reading process more interactive and creative, the students were broken up into small groups and given one section of the story to read. They were challenged to make informed predictions about what had come before in the story and what would most likely follow, based on what they read in their section. The students were then challenged to choose a creative way to interpret

and represent their section of the story for presentation to the rest of the groups. When everyone finished, the sections were shared and the story was linked together. A brief discussion followed that focused on indigenous peoples in Canada, what they value in their cultures, and where they live. The following session continued this conversation and included a deeper reflection on character; the students were asked to choose a character and answer questions in the “hot seat” as

that character. The “hot seat” activity asks students to embody a character from a story and to act and respond to questions like the character they have chosen. Here, we were interested in having the students explore perspective, empathy, and character.

We then introduced the students to the voyageurs, an important group in indigenous history, through the second Rabbit and Bear Paws graphic novel, subtitled *The Voyageurs*. In this lesson, the students first completed a pre-reading web quest where they searched the Internet, using reputable websites such as McGill University’s digital library, for the answer to the following question: who were the voyageurs? (see fig. 2). The students then took their information and put it into a mini-presentation using the free, web-hosted presentation software Prezi. The students shared their presentations with their classmates to encourage collaboration and community building further. Afterward, the students were broken up into smaller groups for literature circles, which involved reading a given text and then adopting various reading roles as a way to dig deeper and to engage further with the text: the “word wizard” was responsible for defining unfamiliar words; the artist was responsible for representing key plot points and themes in each chapter graphically; the discussion director was responsible for leading discussions at the end of each chapter on important issues or themes; and the predictor was responsible for making educated predictions about what was to come based on what had happened already.

To explore indigenous cultures more deeply, including the teachings of the seven grandfathers, the historical familial/gender roles, and the role of nature and the community, we then read the later Rabbit and Bear Paws graphic novel, subtitled *True Hearts*. As a pre-reading activity, the students created a digital collage on the iPads using an art-making app that allowed the importation of images, video, sound, and text in response to the prompt: “What does it mean to love others?” In an attempt to build community, we then read the story as a class using guided reading, a literacy practice involving a teacher reading a text aloud to the class while students follow along in their own texts. The practice of guided reading helps struggling readers keep pace and aids them in developing faster word recognition. At the end of this, the students created tableau representations summarizing the key plot points.

Pairing Graphic Novels with Other Literature in the Classroom

In order to have the students understand better the residential school system and the injustices many indigenous communities suffered during this time, most significantly the removal of indigenous children from their families and the colonizers’ deliberate attempts to extinguish indigenous cultures and ancestral languages, we read the novella *Fatty Legs*, based on the experience of co-author Margaret Pokiak-Fenton

as an Inuit student in a residential school. Specifically, the book focuses on the emotional and psychological abuses many students suffered and the loss of their cultures and identities. This was a particularly important theme to explore as the students learned how one's culture, family, and community shape one's identity and how a loss of connection to one's culture affects the identity development process greatly. The students were then visited by an indigenous elder who introduced the students to a community circle and the smudging ceremony with burning sage for cleansing and truth telling. He also talked about his experience as an individual who is half-indigenous and his own personal search for identity and belonging. The students asked questions, made connections to their own family situations in group homes, and were able to hold indigenous artifacts like a peace pipe and various musical instruments.

Cultural Awareness, Indigenous Perspectives, and Social, Political, and Economic Issues

From our experience using graphic novels that explore indigenous perspectives, we have found that these texts have been excellent classroom tools with which to build cultural awareness and with which to explore difficult social, political, and economic issues. The graphic novels are an accessible medium for all students and particularly for struggling students, as the format is light on text and heavy on images. The one

student who self-identified as part-indigenous found the texts particularly engaging. As a student with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), she found the learning process difficult and disjointed at times. During this unit, however, it appeared as though the subject matter and the texts were a way for her to learn more about her indigenous identity in a historical and cultural context, which held her focus and interest.

In post-project interviews with the eight students, at least half indicated an increase in knowledge awareness about indigenous cultures: most obviously, the indigenous connection to the land from reading the Rabbit and Bear Paws graphic novel series and the injustices the indigenous people suffered at the hands of the colonizers in the residential schools system.

The teacher in this class also explained that, as a result of participating in the digital literacy program with UOIT—a research project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation and entitled “Fostering Globally and Culturally Sensitive Adolescents: Social Action through Digital Literacy”—and using graphic novels with her class of struggling students, she observed two major outcomes. First, this teacher explained that her students’ digital literacy skills “improved significantly after working with alternative ways to express their knowledge.” What is more, the students’ ability to “demonstrate that knowledge also improved.” The reason for this, she explained, was that the students “were not confined to the traditional forms”

like pen to paper. More often than not, she found that traditional literacies limited the students' "ability to share ideas and knowledge" and that the introduction of alternative communication tools dissolved barriers, with students more willing and motivated to participate in the classroom learning community and to generate knowledge. The use of graphic novels "increased student engagement in the reading of stories" and the graphic novels provided segues for the students to express "their views and ideas in unique ways" using a combination of image and text. Second, this teacher observed that her "own teaching practices improved. Gaps in students' abilities and knowledge were far more evident" when

using a combination of both traditional and multimodal/digital tools. She explained that the project "provided me with a clear baseline from which to scaffold lessons to ensure student success" (Hedges).

Graphic novels are an engaging and popular form, and undoubtedly this has made the learning process that much more meaningful for the students. Graphic novelist Svetlana Chmakova explains the power of the graphic novel to resonate with readers by using the example of an author "render[ing] a charged silent moment that speaks volumes about the character's inner state just through their movements. If done right, a scene like that can hit home deeper than a text paragraph ever could."

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