Valuing the Visual:
Tips for Teaching Graphic Novels and Comic Books

Dani Kachorsky

This article provides multiple rich sources of materials for teachers to use in the classroom—a tool kit of sorts to delve into graphica with your students.

Comic books and graphic novels are two forms of sequential narrative art that are front and center in the lives of today's readers. Sometimes referred to as *graphica* (Thompson, 2008), both comic books (episodic narratives) and graphic novels (complete narratives) are rich texts that rely on a variety of modes such as text and image to convey meaning. As such, they need to be taught in a way that embraces their multimodal nature and complexity.

Unfortunately, the majority of the literature on teaching graphica focuses on its uses in supporting other literacy goals: engaging reluctant readers (Gavigan, 2011; McTaggart, 2008; Baird & Jackson, 2007), supporting English-Language Learners (Cary, 2004; Monnin, 2010; Hecke, 2011), or acting as a source for content (Alexio & Norris, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Boerman-Cornell, 2013). While such uses are worthwhile, they fail to recognize graphica as texts worth teaching in their own right. Within this article, I seek to provide a few activities and resources that can be used to teach graphica as texts worthy of instructional attention.

The Features of Graphica

In traditional literature, readers engage the mode of written text. In graphica, readers contend with a plethora of other features—gutters, panels, images, colors, vectors, gazes, expressions, movements, and so on. Although it is unlikely that average consumers will know these terms, readers of graphica do know how to navigate these features when they read (Monnin, 2010). To become critical readers of graphica, students need to know what these features are and how they function to make meaning (Pantaleo,

2011). Nevertheless, how readers use the features to make meaning can vary extensively based on context, so the resources provided here should not be considered an exhaustive list of these features and their uses. Instead, these lists can best be regarded as a jumping-off point.

Understanding Comics *by Scott McCloud*

Originally published in 1993, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* remains one of the best resources for understanding how and why graphica is constructed the way it is. The author/illustrator, Scott McCloud, literally illustrates the concepts and terminology that build graphica in a straightforward and humorous manner. This book is great for teachers and students.

Scott McCloud TED Talk

In "The Visual Magic of Comics," McCloud walks viewers through a brief history of comic books and discusses the different features author/illustrators use in their storytelling (McCloud 2005). This TED talk also touches on McCloud's personal experience as a comic book creator.

An Introduction to the Grammar of Visual Design

While Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* is a wonderful resource for understanding the nature of visuals, it is also complex and expensive. However, the New South Wales curriculum support page features a more manageable version designed for teacher professional development (Quality Teacher Program, 2002). The link is a bit cumbersome, but it is well worth it (www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/english/assets/pdf/grammar.pdf).

Multimodality Glossary

This Glossary of Multimodal Terms defines every imaginable mode of communication in a clear and concise way (MODE, 2012). The reference material is well documented and high quality, coming from peer-reviewed journals and notable scholars in the field (http://multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com/).

Vanseo Design Blog

Although this blog is not intended as a graphica resource, it is dedicated to principles of design that are consistent across most visual media (Bradley, 2014). Since it is a blog, finding what you are looking for can be slightly difficult because so much is archived. However, searching visual grammar or design basics yields fruitful results. Also, since the blogger is a professional designer, this resource has the added benefit of demonstrating to students how the classroom connects to the world at large (www.vanseodesign.com/blog/).

What Do You Notice?

Alternatively, students can come to graphica terminology on their own. You can provide students with a massive selection of graphica and ask them to generate lists of the features they notice. Typically, students do not identify those characteristics that are more fully embedded in the text, such as facial expressions and vectors. However, they frequently notice major features like panel, gutter, speech bubble, and color. Use student *noticings* to create a comprehensive list that can be utilized as a reference point while they work with graphica. Features can be added to the list periodically. This strategy can be especially helpful in primary grades since the resources discussed previously feature vocabulary too complex for younger readers.

Making Meaning in Graphica

While vocabulary is important to understanding graphica, knowing what features are present and what they are called merely gives students the tools, or *metalanguage*, needed to discuss graphica. To analyze these texts, students need to recognize the ways in which author/illustrators use features and the ways they, as readers, make meaning from them.

Wordless Picturebook Summaries

Graphica is not unique in its nature as narrative sequential art. Like graphica, wordless picturebooks rely on the sequencing of images to carry narrative and mean-

Reading wordless picturebooks offers students an opportunity to develop literacy skills.

ing (Arizpe, 2013). Wordless picturebooks make different demands of readers than traditional printed text, and they require a different degree of engagement during the reading process as readers co-construct the narrative with the author/illustrator (Arizpe, 2013). As such, reading wordless picturebooks offers students an opportunity to develop literacy skills around texts that are both similar and in some ways more sophisticated than graphica.

Furthermore, reading wordless picturebooks forces students to attend to the images. When I first started using graphica, many of my high school students would read what text was present on the page, giving the images only a cursory glance. To draw conclusions about a text, they needed to examine the images closely, make inferences about content, and justify their conclusions. To start this process, I had students read and summarize wordless picturebooks and then compare summaries.

Although the basic plotlines of students' summaries are often similar, the details are frequently very different. For instance, while reading *A Ball for Daisy,* a fairly straightforward wordless picturebook about a dog, Daisy, who loves her ball, my students engaged in a surprisingly heated argument about how Daisy's ball ends up on the opposite side of a fence when she is playing with it (Raschka, 2011). Some students believed Daisy's owner kicked it over, while others believed that the ball simply bounced over.

When asked to justify their positions, students became increasingly frustrated as they pointed to the images on the page and claimed that what they were describing was happening on the page. In reality, the images on the page could represent either interpretation. The ball is indeed positioned near a foot, though the actual moment of contact is not represented, and the ball does appear to bounce as it is shown in the air in one panel, near the ground in another panel, and once again in the air in a third. However, readers never actually see the ball pass over the fence.

Eventually, students explained that they were adding information in the gutters—the white space between the panels. They were combining the information in the panels with their own experiences and logic to complete the visual sequences. Because these inferential constructions relied on personal experiences, student interpretations varied, but all made perfect sense. This activity not only forced students to recognize that the panels were providing information, but also led students to an understanding of how gutters functioned in wordless pictures books and,

subsequently, graphica. Other excellent wordless picture-books for this activity include *Sector 7, Flotsam,* and *Tuesday* by David Wiesner (2006, 1999, 1991), and *The Snowman* by Raymond Briggs (1978). Although these texts might seem more appropriate for primary grades, they work just as well at the secondary level. Additionally, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2006), a wordless graphic novel, could be read for the same purpose.

Comic Reconstruction

Students can use a cut-up comic strip that can be reconstructed to form a coherent storyline. To do this, students need to closely examine the images, consider potential narrative moves that can be inferred across many images, and determine what inferential leaps are too great for a reader to make. Furthermore, in selecting how to begin and end their reconstructions, students demonstrate knowledge of narrative structures. Using a comic strip that does not contain text is best because when paired with the images in the panels, the clues in syntax and sentence structure make it easy for students to reconstruct the original storyline.

Low (2012) recommends using the classic Spy *vs. Spy* comic strips, which have very few text features, though primary teachers might find *Garfield* or *Peanuts* more appropriate for their students. These comic strips are excellent for showing students how graphica can be drawn and arranged so that the narrative structure becomes obvious. For example, many of the *Spy vs. Spy* comic strips feature a sequence of panels where one spy prepares a trick to play on the other spy. My students quickly picked up on the processes shown in the images and readily sequenced those panels. Also, *Spy vs. Spy* comics typically feature an explosion that students accurately placed at the end of their reconstructions, reasoning that the spies could not build bombs that had already exploded.

Not all graphica is as clearly sequenced as the *Spy vs. Spy* comics. In particular, *The Arrival,* a wordless graphic novel, conveys a narrative of a man immigrating to a foreign country. However, the fancifulness of the images allows for multiple interpretations by readers. For example, in reconstructing pages 24–27 of chapter two in *The Arrival,* students developed their own original narratives by sequencing the images in different ways. While some students still showed the protagonist wandering around a new city in confusion, others told a story of a

Comic strips are excellent for showing students how graphica can be drawn and arranged so that the narrative structure becomes obvious.

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man caught in a *light storm,* a man following a tour guide, and a man trapped in a *Twilight Zone*–esque nightmare. In addition to being fun, using a less structured narrative sequence can help demonstrate to students how much work the gutters do for the story. Fanciful images are also featured in Wiesner's wordless picturebooks, making them excellent alternatives.

What I Meant to Say

To extend the comic reconstruction activity, ask students to write out text-only versions of their stories. These written versions can then be compared to readings done by other students to see if the storylines represent what the student-author intended. Often, what their peers read differs from what the student-author was trying to convey. In most cases, this incongruity occurs because the student-author was making too big of a leap in the gutter. In other words, there were not enough clues in the panels for the reader to make the appropriate inferences in the gutter to construct the intended story. This awareness assists students in understanding how different features converge in graphica to convey meaning. Furthermore, students can begin discussing what they would need to do to make the sequence coherent enough to convey the story they were attempting to tell.

Bitstrips

While originally a social networking application, available for Android and Apple, Bitstrips can be easily adapted for classroom use. (Most apps mentioned in this article are available online through Google Play [https://play.google.com/store] or Apple iTunes [www.apple.com/itunes/]). Essentially, Bitstrips allow students to create an avatar that can then be placed into pre-existing single-comic panels that are updated frequently. Also, if students are Facebook friends, they can incorporate each other's avatars into certain panels. Many panels do include a single textbox that explains the situation occurring in the image. However, these are editable, so Bitstrips becomes a great platform for teaching students that less is more when it comes to text in comics. Students can write their own text to make the preexisting scenarios take on different meanings, and students can be challenged to infer what events came before the existing panel. As with many of the activities already discussed, this helps prevent students from relying too heavily on text in graphica.
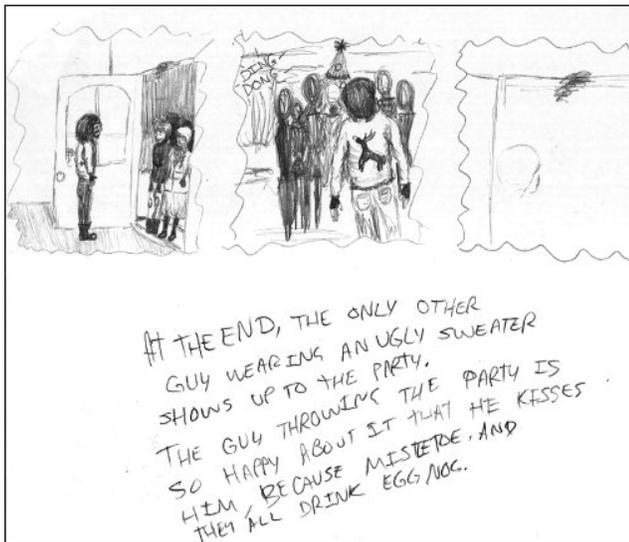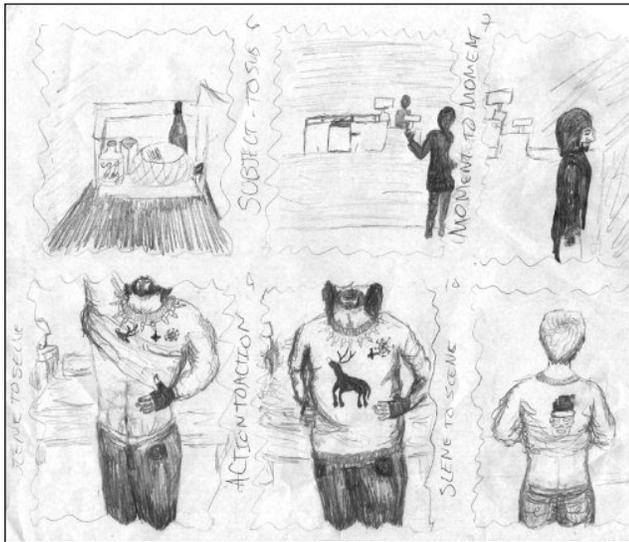
Bitstrip Example

Prove It!

In addition to gutters and panels, graphica utilizes a plethora of other features students can use to construct meaning. A color scheme can indicate time of day or the mood of a story. Character facial expressions and gestures can provide clues to characters' feelings and personality traits. Wavy lines can suggest movement or scent.

I have found that the best way to direct students' attention to these features is by asking them to prove conclusions they draw about the text. For example, while reading the manga version of *Macbeth,* several students decided that Macbeth was going insane (Sexton, Grandt, & Chow, 2008). As evidence to support their conclusion, students cited aspects of image and text: (1) the dagger Macbeth followed down the hallway glowed in the dark like a ghost, so he was seeing things; (2) Macbeth had a speech bubble, so he was talking out loud to himself; and (3) the illustrators drew Macbeth with *crazy eyes.*

Typically, I wait for these moments to occur naturally during instruction, but for those who would rather have a more structured lesson, students can be presented with a series of questions asking them about the story's mood, characters' personalities/behaviors, and ambiguous sequences. Then students can be asked to justify their responses with visual and textual evidence. Highlighter tape and sticky notes can be used by students to indicate the exact features that led them to draw their conclusions. Often, students are not aware of what features led them to the conclusions they drew, so asking them to pinpoint these can help them become more aware of the aspects of graphica while they read.

Creating Graphica

Sometimes the best way to learn something is by doing. As such, having students create their own graphica can be incredibly useful in making students more aware of how the features in these texts interact (Pantaleo, 2011). As with the What I Meant to Say activity, authoring graphica requires students to be aware of how and why features are used, and requires them to use such features effectively.

Drawing Words and Writing Pictures

The Drawing Words & Writing Pictures website (dw-wp.com) was created by two cartoonists, Jessica Abel and Matt Madden (2014), who are also educators. Although there are resources on this site for teaching graphica, they also offer an extensive set of materials to aid in comic creation, including video tutorials.

Wally Wood's 22 Panels That Always Work

For students who are having difficulty figuring out what to draw next, this is the perfect resource. Wood offers

up 22 panel ideas that never fail to move a story forward and includes brief descriptions of when to use each panel. An Internet image search for "Wally Wood 22 Panels" will provide access to this resource.

Comic-Creating Websites

For students who are not comfortable drawing, several websites provide predetermined characters and backgrounds that students can insert into panel templates to tell original stories. For younger children, MakeBeliefs Comix.com and ReadWriteThink.org's Comic Creator tool are simple to use and navigate. For older students, Toondoo.com and Stripgenerator.com are free and fairly easy to use, though they have a limited number of characters and backgrounds are often limited to color choice. Pixton.com is a more flexible platform for designing graphica. Characters can be customized, and backgrounds act more as drop-in sets. This website offers free accounts, as well as paid educator accounts. The upside of the educator account is the ability to share creations among classmates, as well as access to a larger number of panel templates.

Comic Strip Applications

Several apps (applications) are now available for cellular phones and tablets that enable individuals to create graphica without drawing. Although these apps tend to be more complicated than the available website software, most are free and can usually utilize photo images instead of, or in addition to, preexisting backgrounds and characters. Comic Strip It!, Comic Creator, and Comic & Meme Creator are three such applications. Keep in mind that apps tend to come and go quickly, so by the time you read this article, the apps discussed here may no longer exist. However, something similar will be available.

Comic Filters

For students wishing to use photos instead of drawing to create graphica, apps are available that can filter photos to make them look like traditional comic book sketch art. This way, students can still maintain the look of graphica without the drawing skill. Two quality apps currently available are Sketch Guru and Photo Sketch.

Speech Bubble Apps

Photo Talks and PicSay are apps that allow speech bubbles to be added to photographs, which can help in graphica creation. However, these apps allow only one image to be altered at a time, unlike the comic strip apps that typically allow an author/illustrator to create a complete sequence.

Reading Graphica

As a relatively new medium, there is not a standard canon when it comes to comics. This is not necessarily bad, but it certainly makes it difficult for teachers looking to select high-quality literature for their classrooms. Listed next are a few resources for selecting such literature.

American Library Association

Every year, the Young Adult Library Services Association, a branch of the ALA, puts together a list of graphic novels that they consider to be of particularly high quality (American Library Association, 2014). This list features a variety of genres, grade levels, and lengths, including single-title graphic novels and serial compilations. Furthermore, the Association for Library Service to Children, also a branch of the ALA, has complied graphic novel reading lists for grades K–8.

Forbidden Planet's 50 Best of the Best Graphic Novels

Forbidden Planet (2014) is quite possibly the most famous comic book store in the United States, and the people who work there are some of the most knowledgeable in the business. Their list of the 50 best graphic novels includes many classics and a few less familiar titles. However, all are incredibly high-quality texts revered by readers and creators alike.

Wikipedia's List of Award-Winning Graphic Novels

Some graphic novels and comic books have earned spectacular awards, including the Hugo Award and the Pulitzer Prize (Wikimedia Foundation, 2014). Also included on this Wikipedia list are Eisner and Harvey award winners, which are awarded to graphica by field experts.

Breathtaking Adaptations: 13 Classic Books Transformed into Graphic Novels

This photographic list created by The Huffington Post serves as a nice jumping-off point for discovering novel-to-comics adaptations (TheHuffingtonPost.com, 2014). Although not an extensive list by any means, it does feature some of the more visually interesting adaptations available.

Index to Political and Social Commentary in Comic Books

Mike Grost (2014), a comic book enthusiast, catalogued the graphica collection in the Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection according to the political and social issues featured in each title. This index can be incredibly useful when acknowledging that comics, like other literary texts, are products of their time periods.

This resource can help build content-based units around graphica, especially in regard to propaganda comics and women's rights.

Final Thoughts

Graphica is a rich, robust medium—texts comprised of a variety of features from which students can make meaning. They are carefully constructed, requiring readers to make high-level inferences and creators to be hyper-aware of design choices. This makes these texts worth examining in the classroom as more than a means for accomplishing other literacy ends. In our increasingly multimodal world, graphica needs to be embraced by teachers in ways that allow students to read such texts expertly. Of course, what is provided in this article is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg, a tool for surviving in the trenches. Or, as in the case of graphica, a tool for surviving in the gutters.

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