

GRAPHIC NOVELS AS LEARNING TOOLS

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ABSTRACT--*Graphic novels over the years have become popular and have established themselves as important tools of teaching and learning. These novels not only create interest but also provide ease in learning and analysing because of the visual input. Graphic novels are useful in equipping learners with language skills like reading and writing, vocabulary and mood. Higher Order Thinking skills, media literacy, multiple intelligences can also be developed and enhanced using graphic novels.*

KEYWORDS--*Graphic novels, visual, Higher Order Thinking Skills, media literacy, cultural literacy, language skills, Multiple intelligences, language learning tools.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Graphic Novel is a format that can be fiction, non-fiction, history, fantasy, or any other genre. Graphic novels are book-length comics and like comic books they also tell a story sequentially. They are sequential visual art, usually with text, that is often told in a series of rectangular panels. Many comics and graphic novels emphasize drama, adventure, character development, striking visuals, politics, or romance over laugh-out-loud comedy. A graphic novel is a complete story in comic-book format with a beginning, middle, and end and continuing characters and plots (Bruggeman 22-27). Graphic novels stand alone as complete works, as opposed to comic books, which are usually short serials (Burdge 166-167). Gorman (2003) defined graphic novel as “an original book-length story, either fiction or nonfiction, published in comic book style...or a collection of stories that have been published previously as individual comic books” (11). Comics icon Will Eisner (2008) considered both comics and graphic novels to be sequential art, which he defined as, “A means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (11). Chute (2008) suggests “graphic narrative” instead of graphic novel as many “graphic novels” are non-fiction and defines graphic narrative as, “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (453). In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud (1994) defines comics as, “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (20).

Two employees of Eastern Color Printing Company unconsciously started the modern comic book by collecting a number of popular newspaper comic strips. This innovation turned into a money-spinning business within a few years. Though it is debatable to who coined the term graphic novel, but one of the first such novels was Will Eisner’s *Contract with the God and Other Tenement Stories* published in 1978. Will Eisner started the term as a marketing strategy. Other graphic novels like *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Watchmen* and *Maus* were published during this time. *Maus* written by Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize. The controlled and

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innovative use of panels, gutters and the layout gave graphic novels an adult format and lent each author their own identity.

Wolk (2007) opines that “This medium has to be considered as not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film,” but rather “their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators” (14).

Graphic novels are becoming very popular as they provide scaffolding in the form of drawings or pictures and are visual delight to the readers. Reading graphic novels is an active and complex process as navigating textual and visual modes contributes to this process. Bringing graphic novels into an academic setting promises opportunities for extracting meaning and encourages dynamic discourse. In a non-academic setting also, it needs reading between and beyond the lines that amplifies imagination, analysis and evaluation skills.

II. 2. GRAPHIC NOVELS AS LEARNING TOOLS

Graphic Novels are excellent tools to teach various skills to students. These skills are not only limited to language but also extend into skills of media literacy and culture. Schwarz emphasises how graphic novels can be excellent tools to add media literacy in students.

“In any subject area, studying a graphic novel can bring media literacy into the curriculum as students examine the medium itself. Analysis and comprehension are heightened through graphic novels. In an age where reading is taking a back seat, they motivate the readers to read as processing text and images together leads to better recall and transfer of learning. The images coupled with words provide fodder for the students and increase their verbal as well as visual literacy. The graphic novels add to the skills of comprehension and sequencing. Students can explore such questions as to how colour affects emotions, how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it plays into the message of a work.”(Schwarz 262)

The text and the images together along with the other features of a graphic novel like the bleed, gutter, foreground, colour allows the students to digest all that the author wants to convey. Today’s netizens are totally dependent on visuals, be it on television, social media or any other format. They cannot do anything without visuals and the graphic novels have a leverage over other forms of literature because of this. They have advantage over other formats and can lend a hand to the students to comprehend the content, go to the depth of a work and analyse it which is unlikely in any other format. An added advantage could be the students who were whelmed and refused to read literature, now motivated by reading graphic novels go ahead to read in other formats also.

2.1 COLOURS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS:

Colours in the graphic novels create concrete images and lend depth to the meaning. The colours help the students understand the mood and invoke feelings in them. Most often the colours used for each character-their dress especially, help the readers identify each of them and also analyse their physical traits. When there are many characters in a single frame, then the colours help to recognize each character and set them apart from each other. Colours also support to understand the change in point of view. E.g. In the graphic novel ‘Arrival’, the pictures are dark and shaded in the initial frame which shows transition, but later when the main character is

settled, safe in a newer place a bright shade is used. Above all bright colours evoke an interest in the young readers as is seen in the graphic novel *American Born Chinese*. Colours aid the students to understand the cultural connotations like the colour of veil in black in *Persepolis*. When Marjane feels emotionally saddened at losing her uncle the sketches are devoid of any colour. Marjane is representing two different visions of the world through the two colours the black and the white. The use of colours can be explained deftly for understanding setting in the stories and novels. The case in point is the chapter named 'The Shabbat' in *Persepolis*, where Satrapi uses a frame that shows complete black and the caption reads "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger" (142). This technique to use all black is very appropriate as no words could have described what a little girl felt looking at the bracelet of her friend attached to something which she does not even have the courage to see.

Royals and royalty are often shown in blue, red anger, feisty, black often to show negativity or darker mood. E.g. in the cover page given below of the Graphic novel *Maus*, the colours red and black is used to discuss the mood and of what is to come in the entire novel. The title in red sets the entire mood of danger and revolution, the black cat in contrast with the blue mice also shows the cat as negative and more powerful and the swastika in black adds to the negativity and menacing. The mice on the other hand in light blue, a secondary colour shows their status in the society. The mice's shadow in the backdrop in light colour, not vivid definite strokes leads to the meaning that they live in shadows and fear all the time. Inside the graphic novel Art Spiegelman has used only black and white. While teaching a graphic novel in the class a teacher can use colours to teach many things. The students can be asked to fill colours according to the mood in the chapter or the panel and a group discussion can be pursued to understand why they used a particular colour. The cultural connotations of different colours can also bring about a rich discussion. The black in the veil in *Persepolis* and the black in *Maus* to depict the cat can lead to fruitful discussion to establish the choices of colours in literature and in particular in graphic novels.

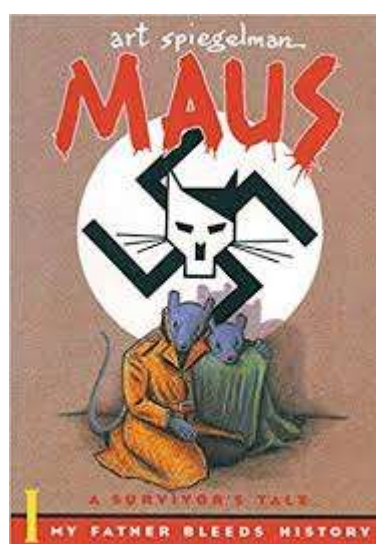


Figure 1: cover page



Figure 2: Colour Guide

<http://files.umwblogs.org/graphicnovel.umwblogs.org/files/2015/10/06165938/color-emotion-510x447.jpg>

2.2 GRAPHIC NOVELS AND MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES:

Howard Gardener's Multiple Intelligences theory, as proposed in his book 'Frames of mind' can be excellently taken ahead especially for verbal-linguistic and visual-spatial intelligences using graphic novels. The space used in each frame, gutter and panels can make the students enhance spatial intelligence and also helps them to understand how space can add meaning to the text. David Low (2012) notes that use of a gutter is "a continual, active communication between author and reader," a process he calls gutterance (p. 372), taking place. Gutterance occurs when individual panels allow readers to project coming, unknown spaces. The gutter, panel and frame space allow and encourages the student to infer and add to the meaning. In the panel below from the graphic novel Persepolis the use of space can infer a whole lot of meaning. The first Frame which shows violence is a larger frame and the second one is a smaller frame which in contrast shows people partying and enjoying. The Second frame has more detailing of faces while the first one does not require the detailing as it depicts a gory scene. The use of large space to depict violence makes the scene gorier and brings home the fact that there are two different facets in the same city and that the violence is more wide spread than the scenes of partying and happiness. The second frame also attracts our attention to proxemics (use of space) while partying, the characters are closer as happens while dancing and enjoying in contrast to violence where people are scared and run here and there creating more space between each character. Graphic novels easily lend themselves to teach the students all these observations related to space.

The space or proxemics can also be used to discuss the mood and different aspects of communication. In the example below (Fig-4) the teacher's face is shown prominently and her hair grey with few strands of black. This clearly shows her authoritative figure in age as well as in status. In the second panel her size gives her the authority over the little girl. Her posture, the eye shape and the gaze also help the reader understand her authoritative figure. Teachers can discuss these observations in the class and later provide them with panels and frames of different graphic novels and have a group discussion or a free flow of ideas on how the space provides meaning to the text.



Figure 3: use of space

<https://encryptedtbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn%3AANd9GcSIUsYPNqhxR99766bfwAMnP9G9yy1FrtchIly2ibSPArLv1Zy>



Figure 4: use of proxemics

2.3 VISUAL LEARNING:

Graphic novels are equipped with images that become a strong carrier of the message in a visual form. With the increased use of the internet and digital content, readers get accustomed to comprehend with the support of images that go along with it. In this scenario, graphic novels help them in better comprehension with the visuals they provide. Visual learners benefit a lot from the graphic novels. As Chute (2008) feels “Students who do not understand a concept from the direct text may understand it through the visual representation in graphic novels. In this case, graphic novels are especially important in promoting ideas of visual literacy and accommodating students who are classified as visual learners. The combination of images and words increase students’ comprehension.” By combining both words and pictures, graphic novels have an enormous power to tell stories and to transmit messages” (Williams, 2008). Varnum and Gibbons (2001) add, “There is a synergy between words and pictures ... such that their combined effect is greater than or different from what might have been predicted” (p. xiv). Graphic novels build in the skills of sequencing, interpreting non-verbal gestures, making

inferences through the images/visuals that occupy them. They are a blessing in disguise for dyslexics or students with learning disabilities. The varied fonts (bold, large, italics), context clues, illustrations lend a helping hand to these students to understand the text without completely relying on the words and their meaning. They need not unnecessarily worry and complicate their lives in trying to decipher the meaning of words and sentences, this makes them relaxed and graduates them to build new set of visual skills without hindering on the meaning. These novels allow the readers to slither their way into the world of story and extract the meaning easily. In Thompson's opinion in using these books the images actually model the visualization most text-based learners do while reading; they "work interdependently with the text and offer a symbiotic example of what good readers do to create mental images as they read." The Graphic novels have minimal, short and simple text in the balloons accompanied by visuals that encourages a reader to go ahead and read it. The reduced amount of text and attention-grabbing graphics in graphic novels inspire reluctant readers, enable struggling readers, and even challenge the higher-level learner to infer, predict, and reflect on what they read (Frey & Fisher, 2008)

2.4 MEDIA LITERACY/SKILLS:

The five core concepts of media literacy, namely Authorship, Format, Audience, Content, and Purpose can be best taught using graphic novels. For example, the panels from the graphic novels Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi, can be used to teach Media literacy. The images can be used to ask questions like:

Would the understanding of these images be different if they were in colour? How does a black and white image affect your understanding? How would the same text without images impact our understanding? Does the term/word revolution become much clearer because of the images? Why do you think the two different groups are shown in two contrasting colours? Is the use of black colour for the groups that wanted veil appropriate? The answer to these questions can lead the students to analyse and evaluate any media provided to them and also take it further into analysing media in their day to day life.

Five Key Questions of Media Literacy Texts

1. "Who created this message?"
2. "What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?"
3. "How might different people understand this message differently?"
4. "What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?"
5. "Why is this message being sent?"

Source: The Center for Media Literacy (<http://www.medialit.org>)

Fig:5 Five Key Questions of Media Literacy Texts



Figure 6: Analysis Media Literacy Questions

2.5 LANGUAGE & LITERARY SKILLS:

Language skills can also be taught to students with the help of graphic novels. Reading with correct intonation, prosody comes with great difficulty. The way dialogues are written in the balloons in the frames of graphic novels can be used to practice reading aloud. The visuals in the graphic novels give clues as to how the dialogue should be read. According to Teresa Mendez the use of Graphic novels in encouraging reading cannot be denied.

Adolescent readers face a host of complicated problems, ranging from general reluctance to pick up a book to literacy, an inability to fully grasp the meaning of words. Proponents suggest that comic books and graphic novels can help. For the reluctant reader, they are absorbing. For the struggling reader or the reader still learning English, they offer accessibility: pictures for context, and possibly an alternate path into classroom discussions of higher-level texts. They expand the vocabulary and introduce the ideas of plot, pacing, and sequence.

Moreover, the simple sentence structure and visual demonstrations in graphic novels can be beneficial to struggling readers with frustrating reading experience. Many graphic novels use text bubbles and short sentences that makes it easy for the readers and they readily give themselves to the task of reading.

Reluctant readers may not be able to detect certain literacy elements such as tone, mood, theme, and foreshadowing from text alone. The images in graphic novels provide these elements at a level easier to reach for many readers (Beers, Probst, &Roef, 2007). Foreground and background are also used skilfully by the authors to emphasize the prominence of various characters in the panel and lend meaning which even a nuanced reader may pick up. For example, the fallen down building acts as the foreground which attracts our attention and tells the horrific story of the people who lived in it, including Satrapi's friend and her family. The third frame has Satrapi herself in the foreground and though her face is almost covered with a scarf her palms on her mouth as if to suppress the scream and the eyes wide tells vividly how terrified she was to look at the building and the bracelet attached to something. The graphic below illustrates how setting, foreground, expressions all come alive in graphic novels and lend themselves very easily to teaching and understanding of these otherwise difficult skills.



Figure 7: Literary Skills

Teaching and learning literary elements of analysing a given text like plot, character, mood, tone, setting, conflict, and figures of speech like simile, metaphor, and exaggeration can be fostered and enhanced by graphic novels. They also can be used to nurture analytical and evaluating skills that are higher order thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy.

Graphic novels help the students and provide succour to the students overwhelmed by the difficulty of vocabulary, content and context. The pictures help the learners understand the meaning of the content, learn vocabulary and all in all comprehend the meaning of the text. This motivates the readers and they want to go on with the reading and experiment with reading of varieties of texts. This motivated reading can lead the learners to read without fear and comprehend and at times go a step ahead and analyse the text. This can further be used as an advantage in reading different subjects and continue with texts other than graphic novels. Recalling the prior knowledge gets enhanced by graphic novels. As schema is available in form of visuals that helps understanding and inferring the cognitive load decreases in the readers. This helps in constructing the meaning and further connecting with their previous knowledge.

2.6: TEACHING OF CULTURE:

Teaching and learning the culture history, traditions, life skills can be best presented in graphic novels. The author's or the narrators view points and culture gets reflected in these novels. Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi depicted the cultural background of Iran and the historical aspects of the Iran revolution. The novel helps to comprehend in detail as it provides visuals. The black and white minimalistic, simple rendition transports the reader into the world of Iran during the revolution which brings alive the political, social, and the familial complexity. Another example could be of the Marvel Comics which released a commemorative magazine titled Heroes to pay tributes to the heroes of September 11 Twin Tower disaster. This was done as the publishers were well aware of the many advantages of graphic novels and how they can penetrate deeper into the hearts and minds of the learners and make them understand in a simple way the way many responders helped saving people on the fateful day. The graphic novel Maus by Art Spiegelman presents the situation before the war and during

the war and how the Jews were treated by the Nazis. The illustrations depict the horrors of the war and the Nazi atrocities without even reading the text.



Figure 8: Culture & History

III. CONCLUSION

Graphic novels have become popular and mainstream with teachers across the curriculum because of their benefits and the ease with which they can be woven into the classroom teaching and learning. The medium which once was thought to be of lower grade has evolved into a powerful source to develop many literary skills in the students. They add to many skills and scaffolds the reader with not only language skills but also skills of media, culture and Higher Order Thinking. A graphic novel offers reading experience, with the pictures and the words working together, and hence it has the double benefit of seeing and reading at the same time which can be compared with watching a movie with subtitles. Graphic novel is a distinctive tool teacher can use to spark interest in learning and facilitate functional literacy. Jacobs (2007) provides the best conclusion by saying, "By situating our thinking about comics, literacy, and education within a framework that views literacy as occurring in multiple modes, we can use comics to greater effectiveness in our teaching at all levels by helping us to arm students with the critical literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making" (p. 21).

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