Finding Truth, Justice and Literacy with Graphic Novels

Working with students at the University of Tennessee, I use comics in two different contexts, with undergraduates in a general education seminar and with graduate students working toward initial licensure and advanced degrees. In both arenas, I teach using comics and graphic novels because I see their usefulness as literature, as texts that help teach students about literacy, and as content-area resources.

My most-taught freshman seminar is Truth, Justice, and Superheroes. In this course we read collections of classic comic books series such as Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley's The Dark Knight Returns, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's Watchmen, along with newer comics such as Brian K. Vaughan and Tony Harris's Ex Machina, and Brad Meltzer, Rags Morales, and Michael Bair's Identity Crisis. Along the way, we have discussions about power, justice, and ideologies. These works all touch upon complex societal themes of how power circulates and what defines justice. Beginning with the story of a disillusioned Batman returning from retirement to become a type of friendly fascist and ending with the tale of a superhero who hung up his costume to take on the arguably more difficult job of mayor of New York City, we talk about the ethics of vigilantism, the effectiveness of government institutions, and how the choices people make define their lives. In this class we look at comics as literary texts that offer complex characters and intense political configurations, using characters that readers recognize from cartoons, movies, and comic books. We build from the familiar but veer into new territories, examining why the concept of superheroes would and would not work in our world.

One example of an activity from this class deals with Watchmen. This book about a superhero team with very strong personalities allows the class to speak about the complexities of justice. I ask the students to write a response to two questions, "Who is your favorite character?" and "Who is the most just character?" The corresponding conversation raises many interesting points as many of the students gravitate toward liking Rorschach, a violent, paranoid, and strident vigilante with a very troubled past. When it comes to who is right, though, I typically see much divergence. Some students lean toward Dr. Manhattan with his distant view of humanity as a random life-form and the world as an uncaring place. Some see Ozymandias as a person who does what is best for the common good, even at the cost of great sacrifice. Some see the Comedian as a realist, forced to make tough decisions in a harsh world, while many others side with Night Owl, who seems the most centrist and reasonable character. Despite whom they side with, members of the class have a rich discussion that always could extend well past class time as participants defend their views. This book, with its stark contrasting characters, offers an excellent opportunity to discuss, in the context of a fictional work, government and political stances that also apply to people's everyday lives. Not everyone agrees with the solutions the characters offer via their actions, but students do have lots of fodder for thinking and speaking.

DC Comics' Watchmen by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons is considered one of the greatest graphic novels ever created.
Looking at Literacy from a Different Perspective

Although I do not always use comics to examine ethical and political situations in my education classes, I do use them with students to examine their views about literacy in general. Each year I choose a sequence from a graphic novel, such as Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* or Gareth Hinds’s *The Odyssey*, and ask students the seemingly simple question, “What happened?” Usually they start by explaining what they see going on, and I ask them how they know they are correct. This quickly turns into a discussion of the sequential art medium. We talk about the panels, the gutters, the word balloons, the use of negative space, and shorthand symbols such as color changes, sweat beads, or lightning bolts. We also end up talking about the authors’ intentions with the art, and the reasons why they chose to include various words, images, and visual information. This ad hoc visual-grammar lesson usually takes turns that allow us to talk about how we break down and understand texts, how we work with struggling readers, and how we deal with readers’ attitudes.

First, reading comics is not something that many of my students who are, or soon will be, teachers are familiar with. I have seen that the years of children reading and swapping comic books might be well gone at this point, as most confess they have never read a comic book, though many still will say they read or have read comic strips in the newspaper. I try to capitalize on their discomfort with the format conventions to show how they might similarly break down texts to be more easily understood by their students, according to text structures and content expectations. Often these in-service or pre-service teachers are very comfortable with their content areas and do not consciously recognize the assumptions they make about reading their subject matter or doing work in their specific content areas. It is one thing to say that they need to scaffold their texts, but being in the position of novice often draws more attention to the need for them to work to make their texts and content more accessible to students who may not be so comfortable navigating them.

Second, the discomfort with reading comics also puts some of my students into the position of being a struggling reader. Not only do the educators get to think about how they might scaffold reading in their own classes, they also get to talk about the effects of attitude on their reading abilities and stamina. Oftentimes, this means I get a vocal contingent who tells me that they hate comics and would never use them; members of this group do not understand comics. I do not take this personally, but I try to turn this talk into how they might work with students who say the very same things about the texts they have to read for their classes. The reality is that many students might not have the patience or willingness to keep up with schoolwork when they struggle or find themselves confused, so they require particular types of attention. Reading comics unsettles some university students, who might be otherwise very capable and knowledgeable, and offers a chance for looking at struggling readers in a different, more distinct and personal light.
Focusing on Resources for Students of All Ages

Aside from classroom readings and activities, I have another way to engage my students in all the classes I teach: my blog, Graphic Novel Resources (http://graphicnovelresources.blogspot.com). The blog is for anyone interested in reading or using graphic novels. In it, I offer reviews, summaries, and additional resources about a variety of graphic novels and comics. I see this blog as a nexus of my teaching, a place where I can simultaneously display texts of interest while also providing potential teaching connections.

I tag posts by subject area, interests, and reader level, and I try to post about a wide variety of books. I highlight works by authors who write about content-area subject matter, such as Jay Hosier and Jim Ottaviani in science or Rick Geary and Nick Bertozzi in history. I also touch on works that might pair easily and well with required readings such as The Resistance series about France in World War II by Carla Jablonski and Leland Purvis. I include works for younger readers, such as Michael Rex’s Fangbone series as well as more complex adult works like Asterios Polyp by David Mazzucchelli.

From my work in classrooms and on my blog, I endeavor to demonstrate that comics offer much in terms of literary, entertainment, and content-area learning for all types of readers, elementary to higher education. Reading comics can help us analyze how we interact, learn, and conduct ourselves as citizens. They are a potentially powerful educational resource.

Books Mentioned:


