Graphic Novels and Multimodal Literacy:
A Reader Response Study

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Richard Beach

February, 2009

Dedication

For Laura

Abstract

Graphic novels are fiction or nonfiction books presented in comic book format that require multimodal literacy for understanding. To determine how students make meaning of and respond to a graphic novel, 23 twelfth grade students in a political science class read *American Born Chinese* twice. This study employed qualitative methods based on reader-response theory. Types of data collected included oral and written responses of students, student reading questionnaires, teacher and student interviews, observations as recorded in researcher field notes, and student created comics. Responses were coded through a process of reduction and interpretation. Results indicated that reading a graphic novel was a new experience for the majority of participants and they enjoyed the book. With the introduction of comics conventions and further development of multimodal literacy skills, students acquired new knowledge on a second reading of the book. Evidence from this study supports the benefits of teaching comics conventions and reading graphic novels as part of the curriculum to improve multimodal literacy skills.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We live in what has been labeled "New Times" (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Knickerbocker & Rycik, 2006). New technologies make functioning competently in this world hinge on the ability to change and learn new ways of doing things, particularly with regard to literacy. In the past, people were considered to be literate if they could read and write printed text. What we now consider as "text" has changed to be defined as "anything in the surrounding world of the literate person" (Carter, 2007, p. 12), "any communicative medium" (Moje, 2008). Arizpe and Styles (2008) describe texts as made up of different combinations of the modes of print, images, sound, gesture, and movement which include digital texts as well as film, music, television, drama, and print. However, print is no longer the center of everyday communications.

Understanding and producing a variety of texts requires new forms of literacy. McPherson (2006) states that authentic literacy is acquired through multiple paths using multiple modalities. The National Council of Teachers of English (2005) proposes increased attention to multimodal literacies and instruction in use of various strategies to aid in the construction of meaning from multiple sites, texts, and media. Kress (2008) states multimodality refers to "all the modes available and used in making meaning, in representation and in communication" (p. 91).

Technology provides opportunities for people to create and receive multimodal texts more than ever before. Bomer (2008) states that readers and writers are finding new value in multimodal texts "where print and image do the work of meaning together, where sound and music contribute to the perspectives readers are asked to take, where

bodily performance works in tandem with the written word, where print itself is animated and choreographed" (p. 354). Literacy in our working lives and private lives has become increasingly multimodal.

One example of an emerging multimodal text is the "graphic novel," a term coined by Will Eisner when he was trying to sell his book *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (Chute, 2008; Gorman, 2003). As used in this study, it means "simply a thick comic book" (Yang, 2008, p. 186). While a graphic novel is a thick comic book, it is also much more than that.

<center>Comic Books and Graphic Novels</center>

Comic books are thought of as children's literature using the word "literature" loosely given the general opinion of comic books is that they have little literary quality. That they are just for children is erroneous as the average age of the comic book reader is 25 – 30 years old (Pawuk, 2007; Simmons, 2003). The "comic" part of the term comic book might indicate that the book is humorous. While some comic books are humorous, not all are. Comic book designates format, not genre (Goldsmith, 2005; Wolk, 2007).

Comics are also referred to as a medium (Chute, 2008). Abbott (1986) states that comics are "a medium that combines written text and visual art to an extent unparalleled in any other art form" (p. 155). Wolk (2007) describes comics, what they are and what they are not.

> Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-
> driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of
> prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a

<center>2</center>

medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its

own genres and traps and liberties. (p. 14)

McCloud (1993) defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9). This is a generally accepted definition though others add that comics are a language with highly developed vocabulary and grammar dependent upon universally understood images for description and narration (Bongco, 2000; Sabin, 1993; Eisner, 1996).

To avoid confusion, it would be useful to distinguish the difference between cartoons and comics, comic books and picture books, and comic books and graphic novels. Cartoons are single panel images. They are not sequential and do not unfold a narrative over multiple frames as do comics (Chute, 2008; McCloud, 1993).

Historically, picture book illustrations simply reinforced the text narrative. More and more modern picture books use illustrations to enhance the story, even to convey some of the plot. The unique combination of words and pictures in comics, referred to as "the marriage of text and image" (Sabin, 1993, p. 9) is more completely integrated than in most picture books (Bongco, 2000).

It is also important to make a distinction between comic books and graphic novels. Graphic novels have evolved from comic books which first appeared in the 1930s as reprints of newspaper strips and as original stories with superheroes (Weiner, 2003). While all graphic novels are comic books, not all comic books are graphic novels. Both comic books and graphic novels make use of the comic format called sequential art, a combination of text, panels, and images to tell a story (Brenner, 2006).

The primary difference between the two is length. Comic books are usually 32 page staple-bound or saddle-stitched soft cover publications of uniform size that can be self-contained or serialized (Bennett, n.d.; Gorman, 2003; Pawuk, 2007; Wolk, 2007). Graphic novels come in many different sizes and page counts, but they are square-bound and are issued an ISBN or International Standard Book Number, a unique identification number for books (Bennett, n.d.; Serchey, 2008; Wolk, 2007). They can be hard or soft cover bound, with color or black and white images.

Comic books are considered ephemeral and thus denied serious critical and theoretical attention (Bongco, 2000). There is a permanency about graphic novels because publishers reprint them and they are shelved in bookstores and libraries. Bongco (2000) states, "Much like any product subject to a semiotic reading, the socially determined place of appearance influences the decision of the comics reader, including its critics" (p. 24). This gives graphic novels an elevated status over comic books.

Graphic novels could be defined as original, book-length stories having never appeared in the comic book form, or collections of stories initially serialized and published as individual comic books (Eisner, 2003; Gorman, 2003; Gravett, 2005; Versaci, 2007). However, Chute (2008) takes issue with the word novel. He claims it is a misnomer since many graphic novels aren't novels at all. Some are nonfiction. He prefers the term "graphic narrative" (p. 453). Even though there is disagreement about the term graphic novel, graphic novel is what the medium will be named in this study.

Graphic novels can be classified three ways: 1) *mainstream graphic novels* which are genre-based and plot driven, may have multiple authors and illustrators, and are frequently compilations of serialized superhero comic books; 2) *manga*, a Japanese

comic, usually with teen characters, often science fiction, fantasy, or adventure stories involving martial arts; or 3) *art graphic novels* which are fiction or nonfiction in multiple genres and often written and drawn by one individual. Graphic novels are usually conceived of as a self-contained book, even if initially serialized, with the art carrying more of the story-telling and theme (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Hatfield, 2000; Wolk, 2007). This study involves the category of graphic novel referred to as the "art graphic novel."

Based on its humble beginnings as comic books, graphic novels are considered "an emerging new literature of our times" (Campbell, 2007, p. 13). Graphic novels are a firmly entrenched part of popular culture as reflected in allotted shelf space in chain bookstores (Weiner, 2003), increased sales (Lamanno, 2007; Pawuk, 2007), inclusion in school and public libraries leading to a correlated increase in circulation statistics (Crawford, 2004; McPherson, 2006), major films based on graphic novels or featuring comic book heroes, reviews of graphic novels in major publications, and attention by the news media (Dotinga, 2006; Horgan, 2007; McGrath, 2004; Schjeldahl, 2005). Most of this rise in popularity has occurred near the turn of the 21st century. The old media has become new in that the new media combine both visual and verbal literacy (Schwarz, 2006).

New Literacy

The graphic novel creates a new medium for literacy because it fuses art and text, the visual and the verbal (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Both the art and the text must be read. While comics have been compared to films or pictures in the way we experience them, Wolk (2007) points out that we watch movies, look at photographs or

paintings, but we read comics. With the Internet and digital technology, media

converges. "As people get used to reading multimedia documents, they prepare

themselves to read comic books" (Engberg, 2007, p. 75).

    Due to the new information technologies and the complex multiliteracies

required by these technologies, literacy is reinventing itself. Scholars of what is termed

"New Literacy Studies" point out a need to expand our concept of literacy and texts to

move beyond reading and writing print on a page (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006;

Wohlwend, 2008). In order to function competently as a literate person, one needs to

work with a broad range of texts and be media literate (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000;

Yildiz, 2002). Scholes (2001) doesn't believe new media replace or eliminate the old,

but borrow from them, change them, and enrich them.

    In rethinking the notion of literacy, it is important to consider all the semiotic

modes in all the different domains of people's lives (Norton, 2003). Growing up with

television and computers, young people are attracted to print media that combine text

and images and require print and visual literacy (Buchner & Manning, 2004). These

should not be viewed as hindrances to mastery of traditional print literacy (Jacobs,

2007). Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) note that,

> The new Literacy Studies encourage educators to examine the range of
>
> literacy practices that people engage in to mediate and make meaning
>
> of their lives outside the context of formal schooling. The New Literacy
>
> Studies not only encourage a critical reexamination of what counts as
>
> literacy but also broaden the definition of texts. (¶11)

The graphic novel presents a unique multiliteracy experience interfacing multiple sites of literate practices (Carter, 2007). Because they combine print literacy and visual literacy, comics are multimodal texts and reading comics is a form of multimodal literacy (Jacobs, 2007).

Background of Study

I first became interested in graphic novels in my role as a high school librarian. I began to notice an increase in the attention in the professional literature featuring articles and reviews of graphic novels. *School Library Journal* included a "Graphic Novel Roundup" section, *Voice of Youth Advocates* began a graphic novel column, and *Booklist* devoted an annual issue to graphic novels. The American Library Association's campaign for Teen Read Week 2002 was "Get Graphic @ Your Library."

Hatfield (2006) and Schwarz (2006) both credit librarians for being at the vanguard of the new interest in graphic novels, but my library held only three titles: *Maus I* and *Maus II* by Art Spiegelman, a Holocaust story about his parents' survival and a 1992 Pulitzer Award winner, *Pedro and Me: Friendship, Loss, and What I Learned* by Judd Winick, about his relationship with Pedro Zamora who died of AIDS which won the ALA's 2000 Sibert Award for the most distinguished informational book for children, and *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* by Katherine Arnoldi. So, I began to build my collection choosing graphic novel titles from lists in the professional journals and from books about graphic novels (Lyga & Lyga, 2004; Weiner, 2001).

As my collection of graphic novels grew, so did circulation statistics. It was the most popular section of the library. However, I noticed that the most frequently

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circulated graphic novels were the superhero and manga varieties. The art graphic novels with perhaps more literary quality based on traditional criteria were not being checked out by students, and I wondered why.

Not only did I include graphic novels in my collection development, I also included them in the young adult literature course I taught at a local college. The response was divided. Though all the graduate students enjoyed the stories, the younger students readily embraced the format while the older students struggled a bit. They tended to read the text quickly and skim over the artwork. These graphic novels sometimes left them puzzled; they had to go back to examine the pictures more carefully in order to understand and appreciate the story because they were not used to concurrently reading texts and graphics. This appeared to be an example of what has been referred to as the "digital divide" in action. Flood, Heath, and Lapp (2008) refer to adults born before 1983 as digital immigrants, and those born after 1983 as digital natives. They explain that natives "speak, view, and listen to digital language with the ease of first language learners" (p. xvi). Immigrants raised with reading and writing traditional print text may struggle with new formats. While graphic novels would not be considered digital texts, reading them requires some similar skills to reading digital texts, skills older readers may be unaccustomed to using.

It could be assumed everyone should know how to read comics since it is something most people begin doing as children. However, Bennet (n.d.) posits that reading comics is a learned skill that those who rarely read comics or comic books may not have acquired. It may be difficult for them to perceive of comics as anything more than a series of disconnected images or they may ignore the images in favor of the

words. Cary (2004) discovered that students and teachers had difficulty reading

pictures, or rather, did not take the time to read the pictures.

Reading comics also requires slowing down and rereading, involving a high

degree of cognitive engagement (Chute, 2008). Given these difficulties in reading

graphic novels, Rudiger (2006) developed a set of instructions for reading graphic

novels because she contends grownups do not read comics because they lack the

conventions for reading comics.

Mallia (2007) believes that comics, with their sequential storytelling that is

primarily visual with a textual dimension, seems to be a visual literacy more easily

acquired by the young. Adults are more dependant upon the constraints and

conventions of written language whereas children are less so (Wholwend, 2008).

However, Schwarz (2002) states, "Graphic novels may require more complex cognitive

skills than the reading of text alone" (p. 263). This seems contradictory, but it reflects

conflicting stances in the professional literature. Hatfield (2000) reports that some

believe comics are an aid to literacy because they are seemingly easy to read while

others believe that they are obstacles to literacy because they are not difficult to read.

Gorman (2003) points out the latter stance is losing favor. With regard to comics and

graphic novels, she states, "Rather than encouraging illiteracy, as has been declared in

the past, this format is now being recognized for its contribution to the development of

both visual and verbal literacy" (p. 9).

Educators cite many reasons for students to read graphic novels. Children are

attracted to the comic format of graphic novels described as high-interest, low

readability texts given contextualized artwork that aids comprehension (McPherson,

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2006). Educators claim graphic novels assist poor readers and English language

learners (Christensen, 2006; Simmons, 2003), introduce complex ideas in an easy to

understand format (Galley, 2004), and help transition students to more difficult reading

material (McPherson, 2006). Gorman (2003) states, "The visual messages in a graphic

novel alongside minimal print can help a reader process the story, providing a literary

experience that is not fraught with the frustration that often plagues beginning readers

as they struggle to comprehend the meaning in a traditional text-only book" (p. 11).

So why do some readers have difficulty reading graphic novels? One reason is

that readers may vary in their knowledge of conventions constituting reading of graphic

novels. There are comic conventions much like genre conventions that make it a unique

medium. These include ways to depict motion or differentiating volume in dialogue,

one happening in the art and one in the text. Bongco (2000) states that comics are an

"ingenious form" based on a unique combination of verbal and visual elements and

having its own grammar and vocabulary (p. 46).

This combination of the verbal and visual, what Kress (2008) refers to as a

"multimodal ensemble," requires readers to approach a comic or graphic novel

differently than they would a printed word only text. Neither mode carries the narration

independently, but both must be processed together as a whole. Wohlwend (2008)

states, "When a message is conveyed in several modes, the combination of modes

amplifies and/or complicates the separate strands of monomodal meanings" (p. 128). It

requires not just print literacy and visual literacy, but a new kind of literacy, a

multimodal literacy which considers both modes simultaneously.

In addition to the fact that reading comics is a complicated process requiring attention to the interplay of the written and visual, Versaci (2001) claims that understanding comics involves responding to something between the words and the pictures. Brenner (2006) states that this is generally referred to a "reading between the panels" and "this kind of literacy is not only new but vital in interacting with and succeeding in our multimedia world" (p. 125).

It is also the case that, as with traditional prose books, graphic novels have varying degrees of complexity. Perhaps the mainstream and manga graphic novels my high school students read are easier to comprehend because they are more plot-driven than the art graphic novels assigned to my graduate students. Traditional graphic novels and manga are usually part of a series, and as with series books, the reader comes to know what to expect of each book. This is part of the attraction of series. Art graphic novels are rarely, if ever, part of a series. They are unique and can be of any genre.

It may also be the case that the multimodal literacy skills required to read graphic novels become rusty with disuse and need to be taught. Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila (2006) report that some educators believe that 21st century metaliteracy skills must be explicitly taught in schools and that it is doubtful teachers or students have an adequate metalanguage to understand visual texts. Jacobs (2007) believes that these skills are necessary for comprehending other multimodal "new literacy" forms such as the Internet, film, or television and that reading comics provide transfer value to other forms of literacy. He notes that:

By examining comics as multimodal texts and reading comics as an

exercise of multiliteracies or multimodal literacies, we can shed light

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not only on the literate practices that surround comics in particular but

also on the literate practices that surround all multimodal texts and

the ways in which engagement with such texts can and should affect

our pedagogies. (p. 183)

All of this suggests the need to understand students' responses to graphic novels and difficulties they may encounter in responding to graphic novels.

There is little research on readers' interest in or difficulties in understanding graphic novels (Hatfield, 2006). Chandler-Olcott (2008) reports that, while there has been much scholarly interest in the multiliteracies framework, little classroom-based research has been grounded in it, especially in the United States. What research there is about comics or graphic novels includes articles about its history, critical analyses of the works of various authors/artists, and early studies of the use of comics in education. Recent studies about using graphic novels in the classroom support the fact that they can be used to motivate reluctant readers and aid comprehension for less skilled readers.

Purpose of the Study

While we know superhero and manga graphic novels are popular, the purpose of this study will be to determine how students respond to an art graphic novel. Unlike many previous reader response studies focusing on text content, the main focus of this study is readers' responses to the text format of a graphic novel. It will examine the influence of students' knowledge of the conventions for reading graphic novels on the responses. The study will also determine if students recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format which is generally thought to be humorous, light-weight literature.

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Research Questions

- How do students respond to an art graphic novel?

- How do students make meaning in a graphic novel?

- Do students possess knowledge of the conventions of graphic novels, the

  multimodal literacy skills or demands of comics?

- Does this knowledge of the conventions or lack thereof affect their responses?

- Do students recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As an international and multidisciplinary field of study, scholarship in comics draws from fields of film theory, literary theory, cultural studies, history, and education (Hatfield, 2000). While informed by these theories, reader response theories provided the framework for this study, particularly Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional analysis, Wolfgang Iser's (1978) theory of gap-filling, and Jonathan Culler's (1980) theory of conventions. Gunther Kress's (2008) concept of multimodal literacy framed in semiotic theory, as it pertains to reading comics and comics literacy, was also explored. The following review of the literature will present these theories, and then continue with the history of comics as a literary form and the history of comics in education. It will then present some recent studies of the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom and discuss claims for the educational benefits of them.

Reader Response Theories

Believing readers adopt different roles and respond to texts using a variety of strategies for a range of purposes, and that these responses vary according to differences in social, historical, and cultural contexts, theorists have approached reader-response from several theoretical perspectives. Beach (1993) lists five theoretical perspectives which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: experiential, textual, psychological, social, and cultural. This study employed experiential and textual theories.

Experiential Theories

Theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt focused attention on the reader's experience or engagement with the text. Rosenblatt (1995) defined reading as a transaction in a

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particular context between the reader and the text, a two-way process. She noted that several components are involved in the reading process. In order for a reading event to occur, there must be a text, paper with ink markings that serve as symbols for the reader to decipher. Until a reader, within a particular time and place or context, has a relationship with this text, organizes and interprets it, it has no meaning. Rosenblatt (1994) states, "… a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work – sometimes, even, a literary work of art" (p. ix).

Early reader response studies focused on the reader. Squire's (1964) seminal study examined adolescents' oral responses to four short stories to determine how responses developed during the reading process. He identified seven categories of response: 1) literary judgments; 2) interpretational responses; 3) narrational reactions; 4) associational responses; 5) self-involvement; 6) prescriptive judgments; and 7) miscellaneous. He found the narrational and associational responses remained relatively constant throughout the stories. The dominant interpretational responses gradually increased from beginning to end of the stories as did the self-involvement reactions. Literary judgments were high at first and then fell off until the conclusion at which there was a dramatic increase. It appeared that the more involved the reader became, the less concern there was for literary judgments until the reading was completed.

Squire's study influenced many researchers who built upon and modified his system of classifying responses for analysis purposes. Often they created their own response classifications based on the data collected, allowing the categories to emerge

from the data. While labels for the response process may vary from study to study, they generally fall into the categories delineated by Beach (1993):

- Engaging – becoming emotionally involved, empathizing or identifying with the text

- Constructing – entering into and creating alternative worlds, conceptualizing characters, events, settings

- Imaging – creating visual images

- Connecting – relating one's autobiographical experience to the current text

- Evaluating/reflecting – judging the quality of one's experience with a text (p. 52).

The research indicates response to texts follows similar patterns. However, when response is categorized in a specific media, Siegel (2006) suggests one incorporate a media-specific analysis using the language and constructs particular to the media rather than that of literary texts. Response to graphic novels may require additional categories of response.

Responses to Multimodal Texts

All of the above response categories refer to written language texts. Some recent studies have considered reader response to multimodal texts. Here the reader must rely on a combination of modes such as words and images for meaning making. One such study was conducted by Sipe (2008). He examined first and second grade students' responses to picture books and found that 23%

of the responses were analysis of illustrations. Students used both words and illustrations to make meaning in all five categories of response: 1) analysis – analysis of illustrations; 2) intertextual – stories linked to other books and media; 3) personal – connections to their own lives; 4) transparent – merging of story world and real world; and 5) performative – use of book as a springboard for creative play.

Earlier studies (Kiefer, 1993; 1995, as cited in Arizpe & Styles, 2008) examined primary students verbal responses to picture books and found developmental differences in the ways students responded. Children seemed familiar with visual elements such as line, shape, and color, but they didn't always have the correct vocabulary to discuss it. They tended to notice details first and incorporated critical thinking in the responses later. Kiefer classified responses into four categories: 1) informative – content of illustrations, storyline, text to life observations, comparisons to other books; 2) heuristic – problems solving, inferences, hypothetical language; 3) imaginative – entering into life of book and using figurative language; and 4) personal – expressing feelings and opinions, relating to characters, and evaluating illustrations.

Though the classification systems in the studies above apply different labels to categories of response, and though primary students' and adolescents' responses differ developmentally, there are commonalities in the responses with the exception of responses to illustrations. Arizpe and Styles (2008) believe classification and analysis of responses of multimodal books need to be examined more closely as responses to images often go unnoticed due to a

teacher's focus on the verbal aspects of texts. Categories of analysis usually

arise from the data itself based on a variety of theories. The similarity of the

categories used across studies could aid in developing a metalanguage for

discussing visual and multimodal texts.

> Response to the visual elements requires….not only a different language
>
> but also a different approach to the printed word given the complex
>
> relationship between these two aspects. Perhaps we now need a different
>
> term that incorporates viewing, reading, and responding to other
>
> multimodal aspects of the new texts for children (p. 370).

Whether reading print only texts or multimodal texts such as picture books and

graphic novels, many factors influence a reader's interpretation of the text during the

reading process. What the reader brings to the text individualizes the response. Some

factors that influence a reader's response are age and gender, ethnic and socioeconomic

background, and cultural environment (Galda & Beach, 2001). With regard to culture

Rosenblatt (1994) states, "As members of a particular culture and of a particular

subculture or social group, we have absorbed concepts governing the nature of the

literary arts, the satisfactions to be sought, the conventions to be observed, the qualities

to be admired" (p. 152).

Comics Audience

The influence of culture is evident in the ways Americans, Japanese, and French

people respond to comics. Freeman (1997-1998) points out that North Americans have

traditionally considered comics as literature only for children while in Europe and

Japan, comics are serious reading matter for people of all ages and literary tastes.

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Goldsmith (2002) reports that in France there is a healthy comics culture and people refer to comics as the ninth art. Comics are published for adults and for children. She believes the French and Americans may be differently literate. "Each culture has a different way. It's just as easy to think of comics as a rather banal scrawl as it is to think of them as an incredibly complex codification of information" (p. 362).

Continuing her discussion of the influence of culture, Rosenblatt (1994) points out that subcultures within a culture may have "very different yardsticks of literary value" (p. 153). This would account for the typical audience of readers of comics in the United States. The core audience of comics tends to be an exclusive group with a sense that there is a difference between comics readers and non-comics readers. Comics readers seem to believe others consider what they read as trashy and disreputable and they feel a need to prove their favorite pastime is worthy of respect (Wolk, 2007).

Readers of comics are divided into two distinct groups: mainstream or superhero comics/graphic novel readers, and those who read alternative comics which would include art graphic novels and manga. There are more mainstream comics readers than alternative comics readers, with little crossover between the two groups (Pustz, 1999).

Mainstream comics readers are mostly male between the ages of 10-21, though some are older readers and some are female. Wolk (2007) describes this world of comic book readers as an insular male world and believes it is because historically, the majority of mainstream comics were written by men. "The archetypal comics store employee….is a lonely, socially maladjusted man, and so are his archetypal customers" (p. 70). Male comic book readers over a certain age were a marginalized community of geeks or worse, and were considered psychologically and developmentally arrested

(Versaci, 2007). This is changing, though, with the rise in popularity of manga and art graphic novels which are drawing more female readers. Web comics are also offering more choices in style and content.

Alternative comics, anything other than mainstream, have a greater diversity of readers. These readers tend to be older, more literary-minded, and about 40 percent of them are women (Pustz, 1999). Within both mainstream and alternative reading populations can be specialized readership groups based on the kinds of comics they like to read on topics such as war, horror, or gay/lesbian issues.

Even though there are distinct groups of comics readers based on what they like to read, they are unified in their devotion to the comics medium and most are expert in the knowledge of comics literacy. Pustz (1999) states that this knowledge of comics literacy establishes an audience of expert readers who understand the rules of the medium and how creators violate those rules for effect. They also know comics history and comics creators. This serves to separate comic book readers from other readers. Other boundaries are created by comic book conventions, comic book stores, and comics web sites.

While there are similarities among comics and graphic novel readers, because each reader has a unique background which includes social, ethnic, and psychological history, Rosenblatt (1995) does not believe in a generic reader. There is no single correct reading. In the transaction between the reader and the text, the reader constructs meaning. Rosenblatt describes the transaction as a "to-and-fro, spiraling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text" (p. xvi).

Similar to Rosenblatt, Hatfield (2000) describes the work of the reader in negotiating meaning in comics as an active interpreting, a "tug-of-war" that demands intense involvement with the text (p. 10). McCloud (1993) refers to the reader as "a willing and conscious collaborator" who has to participate or work to construct meaning from comics (p. 65).

Meaning doesn't reside in the text itself, but requires the reader to act as a co-creator with the author/artist of a graphic novel. How much the reader has to work to make meaning is dependent upon the creator of the comics. The reader cannot simply read the text in a linear fashion and disregard the images. Images must sometimes be studied to understand the narration. This leads us to the text and textual theories of reader response.

Textual Theories

Differing from the New Critical orientation that posited meaning in literature resided in a static text to be extracted by the reader, textual reader response theorists focused on how meaning was shaped by the reader's prior knowledge of the text and literary conventions, a knowledge gained from reading and studying literature. While the text itself influences a reader's response, acting on the reader, the reader acts on the text with an awareness of his own experience with and knowledge of processing text which causes him to continually revise his interpretation as he reads. Wolfgang Iser's (1978) theory of gap-filling and Jonathan Culler's (1980) theory of text or genre conventions help explain the work of the reader.

For Iser, a reader interprets a text by constructing a gestalt shaped by the constraints of the text symbols. The unwritten parts of the text, the gaps, are filled in by

the reader who makes decisions about what to include or eliminate based on past experience, social and cultural factors, and knowledge of text conventions. Iser refers to this reader as the Implied Reader who is predisposed to interpret the text in an expected way. The Implied Reader is shaped by the text. However, Iser also recognized the Actual Reader who, due to his or her background and experiences, may not fill in the gaps of the text or make meaning as intended. The Actual Reader has some freedom in the gap-filling process and this accounts for variableness in text interpretation.

Comics have more pronounced gaps than written text, gaps you can see in the gutters between panels. Chute (2008) states that because comics panels fracture the flow of the narrative into the sequenced segments which alternate with the blank spaces of the gutters, "comics as a form requires a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation" (p. 460). McCloud (1993) calls the process of creating meaning by connecting the parts, or the two separate images of the panels, to create a continuous, unified reality closure.

The comics format presents the reader with an array of interpretive options which creates an unstable and unfixable experience (Hatfield, 2000). However, Rosenblatt (1995) believes that while there is no single correct reading of a text, that doesn't mean that all readings have validity. Alternative interpretations must not be contradicted by the text and should be based upon literary criteria. Past experience with texts and knowledge of text conventions influence the reader's response and contribute to valid interpretations.

Culler (1980) also believes the text exerts some force in shaping a reader's response. A reader approaches a text already understanding the structure of certain genres or literary forms and how they work. Culler refers to this understanding as the reader's internalized grammar of literature, or knowledge of literary conventions. Without this knowledge of the rules, literature would not be intelligible as literature.

Readers are not always aware of their knowledge of literary conventions, but they acquire them through educational institutions during the process of literary education (Culler, 1980). Children acquire knowledge of some conventions prior to entering formal school settings. Most know the basics of fairy tale conventions such as fairy tales begin with "Once upon a time…" and end with "And they lived happily ever after." Danger, romance and the conquering of evil transpire in the middle. Yannicopoulou (2004; as cited in Arizpe & Styles, 2008) tested 356 preschoolers in Greece on knowledge of visual conventions commonly found in comics and other multimodal texts. A quantitative analysis found they were familiar with speech bubbles and the meaning of different letter sizes even though they hadn't begun formal schooling and couldn't read.

Kress (2003) still believes it is sensible to teach these conventions for egalitarian purposes because students don't come to school with the same background, experience, and knowledge, the same cultural resources, so they don't always know genre conventions. Those who are more knowledgeable about a variety of text conventions may respond differently to texts than those who are less knowledgeable (Beach, 1993). Through education, students learn to read and interpret literature in acceptable ways and thus develop literary competency.

Two studies support teaching about genre and genre conventions. Weih (2005) explored what influence of reading and discussing Native American folktales with a fifth grade university lab school class would have on the students' own self-created narrative folktales. The students developed a common vocabulary to discuss the folktales. By studying one genre, students learned how authors construct texts and then incorporated some of the elements of that genre into their own writing.

In another study, this one conducted in the United Kingdom, Corden (2007) sought to determine how explicit instruction of literary devices could improve the quality of students' narrative writing. Using texts written by accomplished authors, eighteen teachers across nine elementary schools conducted daily literacy sessions that involved reading aloud from "mentor texts" followed by lessons and discussion about specific literary features of the texts. During the weekly one-hour writing workshop, teachers found that students could transfer knowledge of literary devices learned from reading and discussing exemplary texts to their own writing. The critical evaluation of literature and examination of literary devices did improve the children's writing. They incorporated stylistic literary features successfully in their writing. They also found that children developed a metalanguage to discuss their writing using specific literary terms.

Different genres operate using different conventions. Genres that follow established patterns provide readers a specific pleasure that is based on recognition of the familiar (Scholes, 2001). Readers have expectations of how certain genres perform. Radway (1984) studied how romance readers read romances and how they justified the importance of reading romances. She also tried to determine what these readers considered as essential textual features of a good romance, or in other words, what

literary conventions they applied to their reading. She found that the women in her study had rigid expectations of what constituted a romance and they were disappointed and outraged when those conventions were violated. Beach (1993) states, "As readers become more familiar with the conventions of a certain genre, they are more aware of how their experience with the genre is shaped by the text. They also develop a growing sense of their own expertise" (p. 31). The women in Radway's study had specific criteria for the hero and heroine, could define the most important ingredients of a romance, and could list what should never be included in the kinds of romances they liked to read.

It is possible that readers can learn literary conventions informally through experience rather than through formal literature lessons, but they are learned. Galda and Beach (2001) state, "The unresolved developmental question is whether readers acquire this interpretive know-how simply through reading or through active participation in formulating interpretations with others in communities whose members share knowledge of these conventions" (p. 65). The conventions themselves, institutionalized because they rely primarily on culturally specific skills (Christiansen, 2000), and the reader's experience or competence with the conventions, influence the reading transaction and the reader's response.

It is not clear that all students are familiar with the comics conventions of graphic novels as a limited number of students read them. This study seeks to determine if students already possess knowledge of the conventions of comics by examining their responses to a graphic novel. The following section presents some of the conventions of comics.

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Comics Conventions

Comics are a format, not a genre. Mainstream comics and graphic novels are almost always of a superhero genre and exhibit those genre conventions revolving around content, but art graphic novels can be of any genre. However, all comics and graphic novels share textual conventions, no matter what the genre. To understand comics, it is crucial for the reader to be aware of the text conventions (Hatfield, 2000) much like readers are knowledgeable of specific genre conventions of certain literary forms. Versaci (2007) claims comics and graphic novels both engage the same set of formal principles or conventions that form their graphic language.

Besides Versaci, many writers refer to the language of comics (Bongco, 2000; Christiansen, 2000; Eisner, 1985; McCloud, 1993; Pustz, 1999), and they also refer to the vocabulary and grammar of comics. Eisner (1985) states, "Comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language" (p. 8). McCloud (1993) posits, "If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar" (p. 67). While there is agreement that there is a language of comics, the terms "vocabulary of comics" and "grammar of comics" are difficult to define from the literature. For the purposes of this paper, the vocabulary of comics will include all the elements that comprise the images and the text, and the grammar will be the rules of the language, or how the images and the text are used together to create meaning.

The following discussion will briefly describe some the vocabulary and grammar of the language of comics which act as conventions. As with any language, the language of comics is always evolving. The conventions listed below are standard,

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but the creators of comics challenge their readers by deviating from these standards to express unique ways of communicating.

Panels. Panels are the most basic aspect of comics (Chute, 2008). A panel is a still image in a sequence of juxtaposed images and can vary in size and shape. Panels hold within their borders all the icons that comprise the vocabulary of comics, but they are icons, too, even though they have no fixed or absolute meaning. The panel layout or arrangement of panels on the page is quite complex and forms the narrative machinery that moves the plot (McCloud, 1993).

Bennett (n.d.) describes several kinds of panels: (a) inset, a small panel contained within a larger panel, often a close-up; (b) bleed, a panel without a border on one or more sides with artwork extending off the page to indicate time and action continuing; (c) splash, a large or full-page panel often used to set a scene; (d) double-page spread, a large splash panel covering two facing pages. There are also irregular shaped panels used to convey a variety of meanings depending on the context.

Panel borders. The lines that enclose panels are of various styles and line weights and are drawn to suit the purpose of the narration. (Eisner, 1985) states they are part of the non-verbal language of comics. They guide the reader and convey meaning. He presents examples of three kinds of borders and suggests what they mean: (a) straight rectangle indicates present tense; (b) wavy or scalloped indicates flashbacks or memories; (c) unframed implies unlimited space and the reader must discern what is supposed to fill that space.

Perspective. The panel controls the viewpoint of the reader to coincide with the author's narrative plan (Eisner, 1985). These points of view or perspectives enable

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readers to identify with characters and know their thoughts and emotions (Saraceni, 2003). Perspective also influences a reader's response by attempting to manipulate orientation and emotions (Bongco, 2000).

Eisner (1985) presents some perspectives and what they attempt to evoke from readers. A bird's eye view or looking down would suggest detachment while looking up might suggest smallness or fear. Like film angles, close-ups create drama showing detail and strong emotions, and long shots express distance or perhaps feelings of loneliness. The concept of depth can also be controlled by perspective and can indicate importance of objects or characters and also elicit emotional states in the reader.

Lettering. Three types of text are found on a comics page: narration or caption, dialogue, and sound effects (Sabin, 1993). There is also display lettering which is lettering within the panel that doesn't fall into the three previous categories. Examples of this might be signage, license plates, words on a computer screen (Bennett, n.d.). The lettering in the text functions as an extension of the imagery and can provide mood and the implication of sound. "The visual treatment of words as graphic art forms is part of the vocabulary" (Eisner, 1985, p. 10). Letters written in a certain style contribute to meaning much like the spoken word's meaning is affected by inflection and sound level.

The typeface of comics lettering represents a complex system of audio conventions (Schmitt, 1992). Bold print emphasizes words and, with increased size of letters, indicates loudness. Small print usually indicates softness or whispering. Jagged print means scratchy or shaky sounds and voices (Bennett, n.d.; Schmitt, 1992). Dialogue, narration and captions are usually all uppercase.

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Narration and captions. Narration is straight horizontal text often enclosed in a rectangular box at the top or bottom of a panel or set off from the image by a straight line. It reveals the setting and tells the reader what is happening. Sometimes narrative boundaries are crossed with boxes in panels in which the reader is directly addressed. "This self-conscious narrative intrusion, considered such a radical technique in post-modern literature, has always been a standard part of modern comic book convention" (Schmitt, 1992, p. 159).

Captions, sometimes used for narration, are used for transitional text such as "Meanwhile…" or for off-panel dialogue. They usually are enclosed in rectangular frames, but may also be borderless or floating letters (Bennett, n.d.).

Balloons. Balloons indicate dialogue, either external or internal. Internal dialogue balloons are called thought balloons. External dialogue can be spoken words enclosed in a word balloon, or they can be radio, television, or telephone transmissions. Balloons have tails pointing to the source of the sound or thought. Tails for thought balloons look like trails of bubbles.

Bongco (2000) states, "Balloons themselves constitute an essential element as a part of a new pictographic code. The various forms and contours of the balloons enhance both texts and image in expressing emotions, movement, sound effects, abstract concepts, tone of dialogue and secret motivations or intentions" (pp. 70-71). The outlines of balloons add meaning and convey character of sound. Smooth outlines indicate normal speech in word balloons while jagged edges may express alarm, anger, or distress. Thin, wavy lines suggest weakness or spookiness. Icicles hanging from a balloon depict a character that is freezing cold or iciness in tone of voice. Star shaped

or burst balloons indicate shouting. Thought balloons have bumpy, cloud shapes.

Sometimes thought balloons contain images rather than words. Electronic sounds or

sounds from the telephone, radio, or television are enclosed in balloons with jagged

edges (Bennett, n.d.; Eisner, 1985).

 Sound effects. Sound effects are words used to represent sound incorporated

into the artwork of the panel. They are often invented words superimposed over

pictures. Leshinski (2005) states that drawing sound is one of comics' defining

features. Words used to depict sound often sound like the sound itself. Leshinski

described the sound effects in one comic as a "symphony of onomatopoeia" (¶ 6).

Sometimes the word representing a sound looks like the sound as well. An example

might be the word "crack" drawn with cracks in each letter.

 Time. What happens within and between the panels of a comic "become part of

the vocabulary used in the expression of time" (Eisner, 1985, p. 28). Panel and gutter

size depict time and rhythm in several ways. The panel indicates that time and space

are being divided. The number of panels in a sequence depicts the rate of time.

 Consistently shaped panels might suggest time flowing at a regular rate and

more panels usually indicate compressed time. However, the contents of a panel

provide a clearer indication. Time is contained inside a bordered panel, but when a

panel bleeds, losing one or more borders, it conveys timeless space (McCloud, 1993).

The reader is also aware of how much time has elapsed because, from experience, one

is commonly aware of how long it takes a certain action to happen, such as water

dripping from a faucet or the opening of a door. Clocks are frequently used to show a

lapse of time (Eisner, 1985) as is the movement of the sun.

Motion. Like time, motion can also be depicted within and between panels. Speed lines behind a character or object indicate in what direction it is moving, and the number of speed lines indicate how fast it is moving. Among other ways, motion can be shown with multiple images, blurring, or a streaked background (McCloud, 1993). Motion is also discerned from panel to panel. When one panel shows a character in one position and the next panel shows him or her in another position, the reader must infer that the character has moved.

Gutters. The blank space between panels is the gutter. Alternating with panels, McCloud (1993) alleges the gutter is "the only element of comics that is not duplicated in any other medium" (p. 13). Gutters play a crucial role in connecting panels into a sequential, coherent story as much of the action, though unseen, happens in the gutters (Bennett (n.d.). Common elements such as characters or objects link panels. McCloud (1993) posits six panel-to-panel transitions: (a) moment-to-moment; (b) action-to-action; (c) subject-to-subject; (d) scene-to-scene; (e) aspect-to-aspect of a place, idea, or mood; and (f) non-sequitur in which no logical relationship exists between panels.

In drawing a comic, all of the above conventions must be considered as they are important to the way comics work. Comics present visual fragments, omitting more visual information than they include (Wolk, 2007). For the reader, knowledge of comics conventions is necessary for literacy.

McCloud (1993) describes the work of the comic auteur and the reader as a dance.

> The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the
> unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics.

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No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much

from them as well. (p. 92)

This dance is the transaction readers engage in with the text. Will readers make

missteps in the dance, misunderstandings in the reading, based on a lack of knowledge

of comics conventions? Or will the dance be smooth and uninterrupted based on the

readers' history or experience with comics? This study attempts to determine if

students can construct meaning from a graphic novel based on the multimodal literacy

skills they bring to the text.

The next section will present semiotic theory discuss multimodal literacy. It

will also describe the process of reading comics and comics literacy.

Semiotics Theory

Reading comics is a complex semiotic process (Bongco, 2000). Yildiz (2002)

defines semiotics as the study or the science of signs and sign systems of all kinds

involving the production of signs, communication through signs, the systematic

structuring of signs into codes, the social function of signs, and the meaning of signs.

Signs, substitutions for something else, evolve and change meaning or significance

continually.

Semiotics is concerned with meaning generated in texts, not only what texts

mean, but how they mean. Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, devised a theory of

semiotics that defined the way signs mean. Each sign is comprised of a signifier, an

image or object or sound impression, and a signified, a meaning (Beach, 1995; Miller,

2001). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and

conventional. Signs derive meaning socially as people share in understanding their

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meaning (Bomer, 2008). In other words, we read signs according to the rules of our culture, a code system.

Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field of study that puts all modes of communication, pictures, gestures, music, on an equal footing with language. Siegel (2006) points out that "Semiotics is uniquely suited to understanding multimodality because it offers a way of thinking about meaning and text that does not privilege language over all other sign systems" (p. 68).

Kress (2008) defines a mode as a "culturally and socially fashioned resource for representation and communication" (p. 45). Multimodality is the use of several semiotic modes, a "multimodal ensemble," in the design of a semiotic event or product. Each mode has its own affordances, potentials, and limitations. Meaning is made differently depending on the mode. When modes are orchestrated together, as in multimodal texts such as comics or film, one must attend to all the modes present and the interrelationship of the modes. Each mode carries only a part of the overall meaning of the text. In comics and graphic novels, the reader must attend to the combination of text and image to construct meaning. Kress states, "This partiality of modes is a factor that hitherto has not been acknowledged overtly and explicitly" (p. 99).

Kress (2008) categorizes modes based on two kinds of organizational logic: time-based modes such as speech, dance, gesture, action, and music, and spaced-based modes such as image, sculpture, and other 3D forms. He compares the affordances of writing, governed by the logic of time, and images, which are governed by the logic of space. With writing, the writer or reader must write or read words in a certain order for meaning making. With an image, all the elements are presented simultaneously. While

one can be encouraged to view an image in a certain way according to the spatial

layout, one is not compelled to do so. The viewer has latitude in developing meaning

from the image. Writing affords representations of action and events while images

afford representations of the visible world. However, writing can be used to describe an

image, and images in sequence can represent action.

The sequential art of comics demonstrates multimodality within each panel, and

as a whole product or semiotic event. It is governed by the logic of time in that one

reads the panels of a page in a certain order and one reads the text within a panel in a

certain order. It is also time-bound in that time progresses only as quickly as your eye

moves across the page (McCloud, 1993; Yang, 2008).

The panels on a page and the images within a panel are governed by the logic of

space. The entire page or the entire panel is present at the same time. Rather than being

governed by time, these have what Yang (2008) refers to a "visual permanence"

(p.188). The reader can go back and review the layout and panels as often as needed to

make meaning.

Kress (2008) argues that the screen has replaced the book as the dominant

medium of communication. If the emphasis is from written text to image and layout of

a screen, one can see the transfer value of multimodal skills of reading graphic novels.

The panel represents the screen. Yang (2008) states, "By combining image and text,

graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read" (p. 187).

All modes of communication are codified and, while the codes are not contained

in the text nor possessed by the reader, some codes are medium-specific, regulating

formal aspects of a particular medium (Miller, 2001). This is the case with comics

conventions. Groensteen (2007) emphasizes the uniqueness of the comics language in the simultaneous mobilization of the visual and discursive codes that constitute it, and the fact the none of these codes belong entirely to comics.

Meanings of signs must be learned; if a reader or viewer does not understand its meaning, it is not a sign (Miller, 2001). Siegel (2006) states that students must develop "semiotic toolkits" to access and understand the multitude and variety of texts available. Signs can be symbolic representing certain meanings such as XOXOXO to represent hugs and kisses, iconic in that the sign has a structural resemblance to the meaning such as a rain cloud with a lightning bolt to indicate a thunderstorm on a weather broadcast, or indexical being somehow linked to another image for its meaning such as a picture of a factory with smoke billowing from its chimneys to indicate pollution (Beach, 1995).

Comics conventions employ a large lexicon of signs as useful graphic devices to add sounds, motion, emotions, and meaning (Gravett, 2005). These signs, used often enough in the comics culture, become part of the language of comics. Due to the creativity of comics creators, these signs are accumulating and have potential for unlimited growth (McCloud, 1993). Examples of some of these signs are hearts representing someone in love or a light bulb to indicate an idea or a flash of insight. Stereotypes in comics are also examples of signs as when bad people are ugly and good people are handsome. Size and shape and borders of panels and balloons are also examples of signs.

All of the conventions constitute an abbreviated shorthand that allows the reader to fill in the gaps using his or her imagination when reading comics (Sabin, 1993). The following section will describe how readers read comics.

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Reading Comics

Comics are a "bimodal form" (Chute, 2008) and demand readers who are negotiators of multimodalities (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). They are a "hybrid" of image and text, and the relation between the two is a defining characteristic of comics. The effectiveness of comics rests on the interaction and interdependence of the two mediums and requires readers to decipher and read a new language of combined written and illustrated codes (Bongco, 2000). Groensteen (2000) states that the reader of comics enjoys both a story-related pleasure and an art-related pleasure which results in a medium-related pleasure that cannot be reduced to the sum of the other two.

Comics and Picture Books

Reading comics has sometimes been compared to reading picture books because both make use of visuals. Hatfield (2005) states that both picture book and comic book reading involves schemata, the prior knowledge used to make sense of reading. It also involves restructuring which is forming new ways of understanding through reflection or metacognition, and tuning which is adjusting schema to specific tasks through practice. However, he adds that different types of text require different reading schemata. Picture book theory does not address comics page layout with fragmented text and images and the interplay of text and image.

The form of the picture book called the storyboard book does adopt some of the conventions of comics (Spaulding, 1995). These include page layout with pictures divided into multiple frames, animation with the use of lines and symbols, dialogue balloons, and sound effects. Author illustrators James Stevenson, Steven Kellogg, Aliki, Tomie de Paola, Maurice Sendak, and Mercer Mayer among others have created

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storyboard books. Spaulding states the storyboard book is a "hybrid of comic and picture book" (p. 14). Historically and structurally they are closely related. Competence in reading both the modern picture book and the storyboard book involves understanding some elements of plot and characterization from the visuals. From this experience readers develop some of the schema necessary for reading comics.

Comics and Traditional Books

However, reading comics requires a different set of reading strategies than what readers would use with traditional print-only texts. While still following the reading convention of reading from left to right and top to bottom, the eye doesn't read left to right in even, linear patterns, but jumps between text and images, zigzagging and sometimes rescanning the information in a new way both within panels and among panels on a page (Schmitt, 1992).

Priority of Text or Image

Text and images are presented together in comics and Wolk (2007) poses the question, "Which do you look at first, the words or the pictures?" Eisner (1996) states no one really knows for sure whether the words are read before or after viewing the pictures. There is a belief that text and image are incompatible, that when you read the text you don't see the image, and when you view the image, you can't read the text. The two worlds of image and text remain parallel and cannot be juxtaposed (Groensteen, 2000). Schmitt (1992) agrees. "Since it is impossible to 'see' both picture and words simultaneously, the presence of the one necessitates the absence of the other creating a continual unresolvable play of difference between the two textual forms" (p. 158).

Following this line of reasoning, Abbott (1986) believes that pictures are subordinate to text in comics because one who transacts with comics is termed a reader. This subordination doesn't reduce the importance of the pictures which he concedes can enhance the narration with greater power and economy than words; it just means that, as a narrative element, pictures must conform to a literary order of perception. Further, Abbott states that even though picture space may exceed text space in size, text influences the perception of a picture.

This would not take into account wordless panels with pictures only or entire graphic novels without words, such as Tan's (2007) *The Arrival*. Groensteen, (2007) would disagree with Abbott. He believes in the priority of image, not because the image usually occupies a more important space, but because so much of the meaning is made through response to that image. "The sequential image is seen to be plainly narrative, without necessarily needing any verbal help" (p. 9).

Miller (2001) disagrees with both Abbott and Groensteen. He believes privileging linguistic signs over pictorial signs ignores the basic status of both as signs. Treating them as anything other than equals disregards their shared function and mutual importance in the process of reading comics. Chute (2008) and Jacobs (2007) also believe that the visual and the written are equally important and that with the blending of the two, one is not subservient or simply used to illustrate the other. This reflects a multimodal approach.

To return to Wolk's (2007) original question of which is looked at first, the words or the pictures, Gravett (2005) answers it this way. "Images and text arrive together, work together, and should be read together. There's no one rule, but in some

combination you read words and pictures in tandem and in cross reference, one informing the other" (p. 11). This requires the reader to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills (Eisner, 1985), a key differentiation between comics reading and reading of more traditional literary text.

Another way comics reading differs from traditional text reading is that each mode, print and image, has the potential of transmitting separate meanings. Chute (2008) states, "Comics is a structurally layered and doubled medium" (p. 459). Due to its structural hybridity, the double, nonsynthesized narratives of words and images, in one frame the words may mean one thing and the images may mean something else sending out a double-coded narrative. In this way comics are characterized by a plurality of messages (Hatfield, 2000).

Pacing

Pacing is another way in which comics reading differs from traditional text reading. Bongco (2000) explains how the comics creator establishes the rhythm of the narrative. Text helps the narrative move forward, and it also retards the process because of the time required to read and process the words. Images are static or have "visual permanence" (Yang, 2008) and can be perceived immediately while texts take time to read. Images may be part of a sequence and have to be comprehended as such. Between text and image, timing and duration can be controlled.

This is true to a certain extent. The comics creator does have some control over the pacing of the story, but the role of the reader can't be forgotten in the transaction between reader and the text. There is the pace at which time seems to move in the story which is controlled by the text, and the pace at which the reader reads the story. Yang

(2008) describes it as if readers have a remote control and can rewind and fast-forward as they wish. Though readers read comics conventionally from left to right and top to bottom for the most part, there are also the freer patterns of eye movement associated with the contemplation of pictures. Gravett (2005) points out that in wordless panels, the reader slows down all the more to decode the purely visual messages.

Another way the reader controls pacing is through filling in the lapse of time represented by the gutters. Wolk (2007) claims this is where the fun begins. The comic doesn't happen in the words or pictures, but somewhere in between through an active, though mostly subconscious, participation on the part of the reader referred to as closure. The reader fills in the details of the empty spaces of the gutters (Versaci, 2007). This is where the unseen action occurs.

This idea is expanded further by Wolk (2007):

There's more to the immersive experience of comics than what's visible in their panels and what specific actions happen between them. A lot of the pleasure in reading comics is filling in *all* the blank space beyond each panel, as far as it can go in both space and time, with the drawing on the page as a guide or a set of hints. (p. 132)

Concentration and Rereading

It is argued that reading comics requires more of the reader than reading traditional text. Initially, it demands more concentration than traditional books (McGrath, 2004). Readers must employ a unique set of reading strategies for the labor intensive decoding of the multimodal presentation (Hatfield, 2000; Pustz, 1999; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). The mental flexibility needed for the disjunctive

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back-and-forth of reading and looking is taxing and tiring (Chute, 2008; Sabin, 1993; Schjeldahl, 2005).

Reading comics often involves rereading given the fact that it is not a linear process. Faust and Glenzer (2000) found that eighth graders attached significance to rereading because it enhanced word recognition, story comprehension, and enjoyment while it helped develop more powerful interpretations of literature. Good graphic novels are virtually unskimmable (McGrath, 2005). Seyfried (2008) found that if read too fast, students in his elective graphic novel course missed things. So, he encouraged students to read slowly and some read the graphic novels twice on their own. He states, "Successful readers of graphic novels learn that rereading and slow reading support close observation, a necessary skill of visual literacy" (p 47).

In this study, students were asked to reread the novel after their initial reading and responding. Analysis of responses to the first reading sought to determine if students already possessed knowledge of comics conventions in order to construct meaning of the text. Examination of the responses to the second reading determined if knowledge of the comics conventions pointed out to students during the discussion and taught during the lesson would have an effect on their responses. Without a second reading, this could not have been determined.

<center>Comics and Film</center>

In addition to the comparison between reading comics and reading traditional text, reading comics has been compared to viewing film. Images in comics are static like printed words on the page. They don't move as they do in film. The comics reader's eye must be continually diverted from the words to process the information of

the images. Unlike film, the reader cannot listen and look at the same time (Schmitt, 1992). This makes reading comics a more interactive process than watching films.

Reading comics is an acquired skill that must be developed through experience (Pustz, 1999; Simmons, 2003). Those who are familiar with the conventions, who have read comic strips and comics books, will know the ground rules (Abbott, 1985). Serchey (2008) states, "Children who may have been reading comics for years may find it easier to do so than teachers and librarians who read their last comics decades ago, if at all, and may find comics 'incomprehensible' now" (pp. 19-20). People brought up with computers also seem to be naturals at reading comics because the comic panel is similar to the computer screen.

Wolk (2007) delineates all that comics do, all that the reader must understand in order to be comics literate.

> Comics suggest motion, but they're incapable of actually showing motion.
> They indicate sound, and even spell it out, but they're silent. They imply
> the passage of time, but their temporal experience is controlled by the
> reader more than the artist. They convey continuous stories, but they're
> made up of a series of discrete moments. They're concerned with
> conveying an artist's perceptions, but one of their most crucial components
> is blank space. (p. 125)

Comics Literacy

People must learn to read comics in order to develop a certain amount of comics literacy. The fundamental aspect of comics literacy is fluency in the unique language of comics and its visual grammar without which comics would be virtually indecipherable

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(McCloud, 1993). Most readers have internalized this language through experience. However, Pustz (1999) contends it demands training and experience for full understanding.

The language of comics, its basic vocabulary, is words and pictures. Comics literacy requires mastery of two separate literacies, traditional text literacy and visual literacy. Schmitt (1992) states, "Comic reading actively deconstructs traditional ways of reading, creating a different literacy in which pictorial and word texts continually exchange emphasis effectively eradicating the primacy of either" (p. 157).

As stated earlier, McCloud (1993) referred to the transaction between words and pictures as a dance, one in which each partner takes turn leading. This happens through the way words and pictures combine in comics: (a) "word specific" - the words illustrate but don't add to the text; (b) "picture specific" - words act as a soundtrack to a visually told sequence; (c) "duo-specific" - words and pictures send the same message; (d) "additive" - words or pictures amplify or elaborate the other; (e) "parallel" - words and pictures follow different courses and don't intersect; (f) "montage" - words are integral parts of the picture; and (g) "interdependent" - words and pictures combine to convey an idea neither could convey alone. He states that there is not always an equal balance between the two and that "The mixing of words and pictures is more alchemy than science" (p. 161).

While readers of comics have usually mastered the traditional text literacy, they also need a visual literacy to understand comics, a visual literacy which Seppanen (2006) defines as "the skill to understand and critically interpret the function and meanings of different visual representations and orders" (p. 4). It is in visual literacy

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that readers may require some training. Comics is distinguished as a separate, unique medium by the use of words and pictures in conjunction and the separation of the text into sequential units (Saraceni, 2003). However, comics as a medium of expression is primarily visual (Eisner, 1985).

The combination of the text and visual literacies creates the unique multimodal literacy of comics. The relationship between the various elements resists being formulaic; its grammar is continually rewritten as each page of a comic need not function in the same manner as its predecessor (Hatfield, 2000). The complexity of comics is unlimited and as a format, it continues to evolve. Will Eisner, master of sequential art, declared it was "a medium more demanding of diverse skills and intellect than either I or my contemporaries fully appreciated" (Eisner, 1985, p. 6).

Yet people have been writing, understanding, and appreciating comics for decades. The following is a brief history of comics as a literary form. It provides the background for the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom.

<center>The History of Comics</center>

It is generally accepted that the first comics in America were invented for Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in 1895. Richard Fenton Outcault created a comic strip entitled *The Yellow Kid* about immigrants living in an East Side tenement of New York. The main character was a child who wore a yellow gown. This was followed by other newspaper comic strips such as E. C. Segar's *Popeye,* Al Capp's *Li'l Abner,* and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (Chute, 2008; Weiner, 2003).

Comic books were first published in the 1930s. Initially they were reprints of newspaper comics strips. In 1933 *Funnies on Parade* appeared in comic book format

(Gorman, 2003). Not long after comic books changed into something new – original genre stories told in comic book form. While newspaper comic strips were read by almost everyone, from the very beginning of the new medium, comic books were considered a format for children (Weiner, 2003).

In 1938 the comic book world exploded with the first appearance of Superman. The launch of the superhero comic turned the comic book business into a major industry. Other superheroes followed: Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and Captain Marvel. This marked the beginning of the "Golden Age of Comics" which extended into the 1940s. It was during this time that the *Classics Illustrated* and *Archie* comics appeared (Gorman, 2003; Weiner, 2003).

During the Golden Age, the comics industry experienced phenomenal growth. In 1940, 90 million comics were sold annually. By 1942 this figure had doubled. In 1950 *Newsweek* reported that 65 million comics were sold per month or 780 million annually (Dorrell, Curtis, & Rampal, 1995). Statistics vary slightly, but by the mid-1940s, 90-95 percent of children ages 8-14 bought and read comic books. The term teenager was coined and 65 percent of young people between the ages of 15-18 read comic books (Bongco, 2000; Sones, 1944; Versaci, 2007).

Comic books reflected culture, and during World War II patriotic superheroes fought with the Allies against Hitler. By 1945, when the war was over, the superheroes didn't have an enemy to battle any longer. Though comic books were widely popular, much of the talent in the comic industry left for better paying jobs (Weiner, 2003).

Because they were affordable, easily accessible, and so popular with children, comic books were seen as a problem (Bongco, 2000). The most frequent criticism of

the medium was directed at the crudeness of the drawings and drama, and the low level of maturity of the language, humor, and sentiment (Gruenberg, 1944). Comic books were considered "the lowest rung of the cultural ladder" (Weiner, 2003, p.3). This prevailing attitude was the precursor to what happened in the 1950s.

Comic book genres expanded in the 1950s to include westerns, romance, science fiction, crime, and horror (Weiner, 2001). By 1952, one third of all comic books were horror comics (Menand, 2008). There was blood and violence, death and divorce. *MAD* was created as a comic book under the direction of Harvey Kurtzman (Weiner, 2003).

The sales of comic books peaked in 1953 and one of every three periodicals sold was a comic. It was estimated that 80 percent of young people read comics (Gorman, 2003). Most adults found comics beneath contempt and consequently beneath notice. But not Dr. Fredric Wertham. In 1954 he wrote a book entitled *The Seduction of the Innocent* (Wertham, 1954) in which he claimed reading comic books contributed to juvenile delinquency. Though Wertham's claim of a causal relationship between comic books and juvenile delinquency was unscientific, people took notice (Menand, 2008; Weiner, 2003; Wolk, 2007).

Wertham testified in the Senate about the negative effects of comics on children during the nationally-televised 1954 Kefauver Hearings. As a result of these hearings, the Comics Magazine Association of America was created. To counteract censure, these publishers adopted a Comics Code of Authority to protect itself from legal regulation. The Code self-censored material such as profane language, extreme violence, references to illegal substances, and explicit and implied sexual content

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(Gorman, 2003; Menand, 2008; Pustz, 1999; Versaci, 2007; Weiner, 2003; Wolk, 2007). "The end result of the Code and the publishers' conformity was the mainstream juvenelization of the medium which in turn caused the general public to equate comic books as a form suitable only for children" (Versaci, 2007). The adult audience for comics had been effectively eliminated (Pustz, 1999).

In all fairness, comic books may have already been on the decline before Wertham due to the introduction of television. It was not Wertham's intent to censor comic books; he just wanted to have some kind of regulation (Menand, 2008). However, to avoid the restrictions of the Comics Code, *MAD* changed format from a comic book to a magazine (Weiner, 2003).

During the late 1950s superheroes were revived, revitalized, and introduced to a new generation of readers. They had changed, though. The new superheroes were fallible and led fairly normal lives. Superheroes continued to flourish through the 1960s as Marvel Comics published the *Fantastic Four* and launched "The Marvel Age of Comics." The competition between Marvel and DC Comics commenced (Gorman, 2003; Weiner, 2003).

Comic fandom also began during this time. Adult comic fans who fondly remembered reading comics in their youth created fanzines and started meeting together. These meetings would lead to the first comic book conventions of the 1970s (Weiner, 2003).

In the late 1960s, as a reaction to the censors, the underground comix (spelled with an x to differentiate these comics from mainstream comics) movement began. Expressing discontent with middle class values, the content of these comics expressed

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more adult themes such as Vietnam War opposition and the sexual revolution. They were often autobiographical stories. Because underground comix weren't approved by the Comics Code of Authority, they were self-published and sold on street corners and in head shops where their audience shopped. One of the most famous of these comics was Robert Crumb's Zap Comics published in 1968 (Weiner 2001, 2003). "Out of this culture, today's most enduring graphic narrative took shape" (Chute, 2008).

During the 1970s comic book specialty stores thrived. They sold mostly mainstream comics, but influenced publishing because publishers had a better sense of who was reading their comic books, and it wasn't just twelve-year old boys. Many adults who enjoyed superheroes when they were young and many college students made up the customer base. The comic book specialty stores provided an alternative to purchasing comics from the newsstands, plus they carried back issues. Comic book conventions were also a source for comic books as they provided direct access from dealers to collectors (Weiner, 2001, 2003).

In the late 1970s, early 1980s the graphic novel grew out of attempts to create sophisticated stories in comic book format in one full-length book (Weiner, 2001). The term "graphic novel" wasn't used initially, but in 1964 Richard Kyle, an American comics critic and magazine publisher, imported European comics and manga and called them "graphic stories" (Gravett, 2005). Most credit Will Eisner with coining the term "graphic novel" when his book *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* was published in 1978 (Serchey, 2008; Weiner, 2003). Wolk (2007) states that Eisner's book was "not the first graphic novel or the first to use the name, but the first major work to be called one" (p. 62).

People became aware of the "maturation of comic books" (Versaci, 2007, p. 10) during the 1980s. Comics became more literate with more complicated and realistic stories. Superheroes were more complex and their stories were not written for ten-year olds, but for ten-year olds that had grown up. Many comics were published without the Comics Code of Authority seal (Weiner, 2001, 2003).

Probably the greatest changes in superhero comics happened in the mid-1980s with the publication of Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* which Wolk (2007) claims, "paved the way for the acceptance of the graphic novel" (p. 31). These were sophisticated stories and the books sold well creating a demand for graphic novels in libraries and bookstores. Mainstream comic book companies began to publish graphic novels and serialized comics collected in books (Serchey, 2008).

Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale,* a complicated Holocaust narrative about his parents, was published with much acclaim in 1986. It was followed up with *Maus II: From Mauschwitz to the Catskills*, and Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for Maus in 1992. This award elevated comics to a literary form, indicated the public did appreciate sophisticated graphic novels, and raised the bar for comic book creators (Hatfield, 2000; Weiner, 2003). "Spiegelman's success … crystallized a larger trend of which he had been a part: the development of a new breed of cartoonists and comics writers" (Hatfield, 2000, p. 11).

However, the Pulitzer Prize for *Maus* did not help other graphic novels achieve similar literary and commercial success (Thompson, 2008). While the late 1980s and

early 1990s saw a resurgence of popularity with mainstream publishers and comics

shops, it was followed by a decline (Versaci, 2007).

Still, during the 1990s universities and colleges began offering courses on

comics as art and literature. Scott McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics* was used

in these courses. Weiner (2003) describes the book as "partly a history of comics,

partly a study of how comics (or sequential art, storytelling pictures in sequence)

worked, and mostly a wild, educational ride the likes of which readers inside and

outside of comics had never seen before" (p. 48).

In the past, academic prejudice against comics was based on the fact that comics

were hybrids mixing images and text (Christiansen & Magnussen, 2000). "Traditional

thinking has long held that truly great works of art and literature are only possible when

the two are kept at arm's length" (McCloud, 1993, p. 140). In the United States and the

United Kingdom, comics had a history of being a despised art form. There was little

serious critical study of comics because they were stereotyped as "juvenile, disposable

trash" and "viewed with contempt, especially when read by adults" (Versaci, 2007,

p. 2). When measured against traditional novels using criteria derived from evaluating

literature, comics were almost always found wanting (Bongco, 2000).

Gradually, comics and graphic novels started shedding the stigma of triviality

and began to establish themselves as literature capable of rivaling other narratives

(Bongco, 2000). Graphic novelists wrote about serious issues such as incest,

homosexuality, cancer, and war. Besides the comics industry awards for sequential art

professionals such as the Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards, the Harvey Kurtzman

Awards, and the Ignatz Awards which honor best writers, bests artists, best

writer/artists, best new series, outstanding graphic novels, and promising new talent (Pawuk, 2007), graphic novels won awards competing against traditional books. As mentioned earlier, *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize, *Pedro and Me* won the Sibert Award, and *American Born Chinese* won the Printz Award. *American Born Chinese* was also nominated for a National Book Award in the Young People's Literature category in 2006.

There was also an increase in published scholarship about comics and the *International Journal of Comic Art*, the only academic periodical in its field at the time, was published in 1999. Comic study is supported by four annual conferences in the United States alone: the Popular Culture Association Conference with a "Comic Art and Comics" area, the Comic Arts Conference, the International Comic Arts Festival, and the University of Florida Conference on Comics (Hatfield, 2006).

However, it was approximately fifteen years after the publication of *Maus* that the graphic novel boom took place. At comic book conventions of the 1990s, the death of the American comic book was being predicted (Engberg, 2007). The responsibility for its comeback rests largely with the influence of manga, the Internet, and the film industry followed by the attention given to it by the popular press, librarians, and teachers (Thompson, 2008; Versaci, 2007). Since the 2000s, more and more graphic novels are being published, even by non-comics publishers, and many are commissioning their own graphic novels (Serchey, 2008).

This last section provided a brief history of comics and the evolution of the graphic novel. The next section will examine the history of comics in education.

The History of Comics in Education

In the early 1940s almost all the young people ages 8-18 read comic books. Research on the educational value of comics appeared in the literature analyzing the reading content of comic books and vocabulary words used. Educators began designing curriculum employing comic books in a variety of subject areas (Yang, 2003).

One study explored the effectiveness of comics versus printed text only in learning factual information for immediate recall (Sones, 1944). Using a comic book biography of Clara Barton and a text of just the words from that same comic, 400 sixth to ninth grade students of three ability levels had the opportunity to read each text. The comic book readers learned as much as they were capable of learning during their first reading of the comic. When the text-only readers were given the comic book biography for their second reading, they learned more. There was no difference for the high ability group with either method of reading, but the comic book version proved more effective with low to average ability groups in their retention of information.

Because comics were practically a universal experience for children in their lives outside of school, researchers believed they should be accepted at school and used as a teaching tool (Hutchinson, 1949). A manual was created to show how comics could be related to the curriculum and 2027 teachers in 27 states expressed interest in obtaining the manual. After thirteen weeks of the experiment, 438 teachers returned questionnaires about their use of comics in the classroom. The greatest use was made in middle grades and junior high school for reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and as supplementary material for content area subjects. Teachers reported comics were useful for motivation, increased participation, more positive

teacher-student relations, and an increased interest in reading. Some teachers returned

unfavorable reports. They believed that the use of comic books were not compatible

with the curriculum or they had no time to incorporate them into the curriculum, they

made learning too easy, that in the serious business of education, the levity of comics

was inappropriate, and parents misinterpreted and misunderstood their use.

To determine adult attitude toward comics as appropriate reading for children,

Zorbaugh (1949) conducted a study in which data was collected from 3000 personal

interviews nationwide. Only 25 percent decidedly disapproved of comics for children

citing that they were dangerous to children's character and mental health and an

undesirable influence on children's cultural development. Comic books were opposed

more than newspaper comic strips, and more educated adults were more critical than the

less educated. The study concluded that on the whole, adults approved comics as a

medium of entertainment for children.

While heartily embraced by some, the use of comics in the classroom was a

hotly contested debate between those who viewed comics as a powerful educational tool

and those who believed it was a threat to school curricula, traditional literature, and

literacy (Hatfield, 2006), even though studies indicated reading comics made little

difference in reading skills, academic achievement, or social adjustment (Dorrell,

Curtis, & Rampal, 1995; Versaci, 2007). Librarians and English teachers were the

biggest opponents of comics casting them as the enemy of other reading because they

took the place of "real books" (Groensteen, 2000). They believed reading comics

impeded the imagination and caused eyestrain (Yang, 2003).

As previously noted, in 1954, those who denounced comics found a champion in Dr. Fredric Wertham. In his book *Seduction of the Innocent,* Wertham (1954) claimed reading comics had a detrimental impact on children causing juvenile delinquency, abnormal sexual development, and illiteracy (Jacobs, 2007; Weiner, 2003, Wolk, 2007). Wertham contended reading comics prevented acquiring reading skills such as decoding printed text and that communicating by images was a threat to civilization of which reading and writing were a foundation (Hatfield, 2000). Wertham's denouncement caused scholarship on the educational value of comics to stop (Dorrell, Curtis, & Rampal, 1995; Yang, 2003).

In the 1970s comics began to reappear in the classroom as an effective means for building literacy. It was believed that the blend of words and pictures assisted in overall comprehension for reluctant and at risk readers as well as English language learners. Because they were familiar and popular, comics were highly motivating (Freeman, 1997/1998; Hatfield, 2006; McPherson, 2006). They were considered a defense against television and a stepping-stone or transitional device to move students toward more difficult, quality print-bound literature (Hatfield, 2000; Jacobs, 2007; McPherson, 2006; Simmons, 2003; Yang, 2003). Still, the emphasis was on the words and generally ignored the visual content of the images (Hatfield, 2000).

Recent Studies of Comics and Graphic Novels in the Classroom

There is little research on readers' interest in or ability to understand graphic novels (Hatfield, 2006). The literature includes articles about its history, critical analyses of the work of various authors/artists, and early studies of the use of comics in

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education. Recent studies about using graphic novels in the classroom support their ability to motivate reluctant readers and aid comprehension for less skilled readers.

Teachers have found graphic novels useful to teach vocabulary. Weiner (2003) reports that the average graphic novel introduces twice as many words as the average children's book. The words "intangible," "debacle," and "synaptic" were found in a Superman comic (Freeman, 1997/1998).

Comics and graphic novels have also been used to make cross-curriculum connections, as alternative ways to analyze literary devices, opportunities for critical thinking and analysis (Gorman, 2003; Schwarz, 2006), and as tools to bridge in-and-out of school literacy (NCTE, 2005). Yang (2008) created comics lectures for his students when he needed to be absent from the classroom and found them a powerful medium for teaching math. All of these uses of comics and graphic novels were supported only with anecdotal evidence.

In the 1990s both school and public librarians began embracing graphic novels due to the readability and high quality of some of the books (Weiner, 2003). Those who once denounced the comic format were now promoting it. Still, educators and administrators have been slow to accept them. Perhaps some of their reluctance is based on the reputation of comics as "crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (McCloud, 1993, p. 3), the reading equivalent of junk food (Mallia, 2007), associated with people of low literacy (Eisner, 1996).

They may also be resisting something new, especially something part of popular culture, or the "newness" of an old format in book form. Bongco (2000) believes comics and graphic novels are seen as "popular" because they are a different form than

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is approved by the dominant or official culture. Popular is equated with base or inferior. Versaci (2007) advises educators to distinguish the excellent from the poor noting that "excellence in comic books is not isolated to a few titles but is much more prevalent" (p. 28).

Other reasons educators may be slow in their acceptance of graphic novels may be due to mature themes in some of them. They may have difficulty locating appropriate age-level graphic novels for the classroom. Also, it is possible graphic novels are not considered by teachers because multimodal literacy is not included on state and national tests (Schwarz, 2006). Yang (2003) states, "Ultimately, I must conclude that the American educational establishment has shied away from comics for incidental, historical reasons rather than deficiencies within the medium itself" (¶ 12).

Resistance to graphic novels is gradually disappearing as more and more major publishing houses produce them. This tends to make educators and the general public consider this new medium safe and even educational (Weiner, 2003). In Maryland, the State Department of Education in alliance with Diamond Comics Distributors has formed the Maryland Comic Book Initiative making graphic novel based lesson plans available to K-12 educators (Yang, 2008). However, published studies of teachers using graphic novels in the classroom are relatively rare (Carter, 2007).

Researchers are recognizing the importance of expanding the concept of literacy to include multimodal literacy and this implies that educators should accept the challenge of teaching with multimodal texts. To be effective using texts such as graphic novels with students, it is necessary to understand how they construct meaning from multimodal texts which is what this study attempts to do.

Classroom Use of Graphic Novels

What follows is a presentation of some recent studies employing comic books and graphic novels in the classroom. The studies explore using graphic novels as motivational devices, as aids to comprehension, and as tools to develop critical thinking skills and writing skills. This is followed by studies examining readers' responses to comics and graphic novels. The final study investigated techniques English teachers use to teach graphic novels in their classrooms.

Motivational devices. In the first study, a Korean high school math teacher was asked to teach a Korean foreign language class (Cho, Choi, & Krashen, 2005). With no training or experience in teaching a foreign language, the teacher began each class with twenty minutes of sustained silent reading of Korean comic books. There was no accountability for the reading and students were not required to read the comic books as long as anything they read was in the Korean language. While not all the students engaged in reading comic books immediately, over time it became more popular and students often came in during their lunch periods to read. Two thirds of the class was of Korean background and some of them brought Korean books from home to read. This suggests reading comics can transition students to read other kinds of literature. It also suggests that since voluntary reading for pleasure leads to more reading competence, comic book reading can be effective in fostering reading for pleasure.

Reading comprehension. Another study examined the effectiveness of using graphic novels in small group reading interventions with 9-12th grade high school students reading below grade level to determine if use of graphic novels increased their motivation for reading or their reading comprehension (Lamanno, 2007). Graphic

novels were used because the literature suggested they were appealing to adolescents and the format with text and pictures aided students' ability to infer meaning from context and therefore increase comprehension. However, the findings didn't support using graphic novels with students with severe reading problems. These students showed no increase in oral reading fluency and no significant increase in reading comprehension. While self-reports in exit interviews indicated students had a positive experience during the study, this didn't translate into increased motivation to read more graphic novels. Possible reasons suggested for these results were the short length of time of the intervention, the difficulty of the vocabulary in the graphic novels, or the perception that graphic novels were childish due to the format.

Another study addressed the question: Can comics be a cognitive tool as effective as text and illustrated text in fostering reading comprehension (Mallia, 2007)? In this quantitative study, three groups of thirty students ages 14-15 in a school in Malta were give one treatment or method of instruction about Maltese history followed by a questionnaire. One treatment was printed text only, one was printed text with seven black and white drawings and three black and white photos, and one treatment was a comics version of 36 black and white panels. The questionnaire was designed to see which treatment best aided fact retention and it also asked for opinions about the text. The difference in comprehension scores among the three treatments was minimal. However, students responded that the comic treatment, reading the story in sequential pictures, enhanced their recall. The researcher concluded that comics are a valuable affective and cognitive tool for fostering reading comprehension.

The Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2004) had as its goal the improvement of literacy through the visual arts. However, student participation was motivated not so much by reading comics, but by having the opportunity to create comics and display them in school and online. Upper elementary and middle school students in the inner city of New York participated in this after school program. Most of the students were low performing and ELL students. They chose their own topics and content and the comics they created reflected the realities of their urban lives. In response to a survey, students reported that their reading and writing had improved, and that they understood most of what they read because they learned to use pictures to give them clues to the story. They also felt they now needed less help reading (Serchey, 2008). Bitz concludes, "The conjunctions of building literacy skills, being artistically creative, and expressing oneself in a healthy manner is a powerful combination realized through the comic book format specifically and the process of making art in general" (p. 39).

Morrison, Bryan, and Chilcoat (2002) also described using student-generated comics in a social studies classroom. Students researched their topic, created a page layout, developed a story, and then drew and narrated it, experiences that helped them develop their research, comprehension, and writing skills. Students determined what was most important from the readings and then rephrased it and organized it logically. After completing the assignment, students commented on the long time commitment, but they had positive feelings and a sense of accomplishment.

In his book *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom,* Cary (2004) offers anecdotes and insights from teachers and students who use comics for second language development. He has learned that, with adequate information

about comics, teachers at all levels are willing to use them and are finding them a useful tool. Findings indicate that both high achieving and low achieving students read and enjoy comics, comics served as a conduit to more complex reading, comics readers read more often both comics and books other than comics, and that students report comics help them become better readers and spellers and also help them learn more content. Cary doesn't promote comics as a panacea, but does promote their use when they help meet student needs and learning objectives.

In a study of the use of comics to develop critical thinking skills, Versaci (2001) gave his advanced first-year college composition class excerpts from comic books and found that his students were unaware comics addressed mature subject matter. The students found the comics engaging and developed analytical and critical skills that transferred to other media such as movies and magazine ads. He found students participated more in discussions of comics than with other literary texts because they were not convinced of their literary merit and therefore they felt more comfortable voicing their opinions than they would discussing a great literary work. Reminding students that films and novels were once considered "trash" helped them question literary merit and the formation of the literary canon.

First graders as well as first-year college students developed critical thinking skills using comic books. Ranker (2007) read *Incredible Hulk* and *Wild Girl* comics to her class and introduced them to reading from a critical perspective with regard to gender representation. She also read a *Spiderman* comic to help students gain an understanding of story structure and dialogue and they demonstrated their understanding by writing their own stories with identifiable problems and dialogue.

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Carter (2007) also used graphic novels and comics to teach critical reading and thinking skills. In one instance he paired a Spider-Man comic with Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* to reinforce the concept of symbiotic relationships. In another instance, students demonstrated they could engage in critical discourse around a graphic novel, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen.*

Improvement of writing skills. Frey and Fisher (2004) also used a graphic novel to help an urban class of 9th grade struggling readers and writers develop their writing skills. Approximately three quarters of the class were ELL students and all were minorities but one. Thinking the limited amount of printed text matched their students' reading levels, Will Eisner's *New York: The Big City* was chosen for its short, independent chapters about urban life. Over a month long period, students read the stories and discussed the vocabulary and word choices as well as how Eisner conveyed mood and tone through images. They discussed techniques for doing this with words and then wrote prose versions of the stories. The students' writing skills developed as evidenced by their use of more complex sentences incorporating multiple ideas. Students also created an illustrated story as a final project. The stories included dialogue and increased mean sentence length representing the most sustained writing of these students up to that point.

Studies of classroom use of comics and graphic novels to motivate students and increase comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills do not address the issue of graphic novels as multimodal texts or how students construct meaning in a graphic novel. While the use of comics and graphic novels as an educational tool was a positive

experience in the studies, none of the studies explicitly examined reader response to a graphic novel.

Response to Comic Books

A number of studies have examined students' responses to comic books. The first is a qualitative analysis of high school students' aesthetic responses to *Classics Illustrated* comics while reading and immediately after reading (Martin, 1992). Students read and responded to four comic books of their choice over a four-week period. Responses were collected at the end of each week and coded and categorized into categories: 1) reader's personal experiences; 2) reader's own values or emotions; 3) other analogies or comparisons; 4) process of interaction with the text; 5) judgment of comic as text or literature; and 6) miscellaneous. None of the response categories specifically addressed images. Students' responses that occurred during the reading were mostly personal and responses formulated after reading were mostly evaluative. Students' attitudes toward reading and English did not change significantly due to reading *Classics Illustrated* comics.

In another study, Norton (2003) studied 34 upper elementary Archie comic readers to determine why they read Archie comics, how Archie comic readers related to each other in and out of school, and how reading Archie comics contrasted with school authorized reading practices. Her methodology involved questionnaires and interviews. With regard to the appeal of Archie comics, Norton discovered that when reading for fun, students had a sense of control they didn't feel when reading assigned texts where they felt they needed to find a fixed meaning. The visual appeal of the comics was

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engaging and aided in the meaning making suggesting that the visual modality of the comic book is not a distraction to comprehension.

The Archie readers, particularly the female students, formed a loosely connected reading community, a "literate underlife" of comic book culture. They borrowed comics from one another, swapped comics at each other's houses, and talked about the stories regularly. The Archie comics constituted a "private curriculum" for them providing insights on relationships, friends, and communities unlike school texts that they believed were educational, abstract, and unconnected to their lives. School, they believed, was the least likely place to find texts they wanted to read. The pleasure of reading comics was derived from a sense of ownership of the text and confidence to engage with them critically and enthusiastically even though their reading choices received no validation from teachers or parents. Norton concludes that we need to rethink our notions of reading literacy and learning to include the visual. "The written word, while still important, is only one of the many semiotic modes that children encounter in the different domains of their lives" (p. 146).

Kittner (2008) describes a teacher's use of the graphic novel *Pedro and Me* in a high school modern literature classroom and reported the responses of two students. A girl responded that while she liked the story, she did not like the format. She felt the story was too short and the character development too limited. She preferred to imagine for herself what characters look like rather than have them visually depicted. A boy who was a reader of manga responded that he liked the way the story was told. What he likes about reading graphic novels is the way the art makes the story more convincing.

A librarian reports how she taught a middle school semester elective called Graphic Novels Book Group (Seyfried, 2008). Using readings from Scott McCloud's books *Understanding Comics* and *Making Comics* to help analyze the graphic novels they read, the book club provided students a rewarding literary experience. Now they regularly confer with the librarian for book recommendations, not all graphic novels, so, they are expanding their literary selections. Teachers are also beginning to incorporate graphic novels in the curriculum.

In Seyfried's (2008) report of graphic novel use in the classroom, the students were made aware of some of the comics conventions through readings from McCloud's books. However, no attempt was made to understand how students' responses to graphic novels might be affected by their understanding of comics conventions. This study attempted to determine how students make meaning of a multimodal text.

Techniques for Teaching Graphic Novels

To determine how English teachers taught graphic novels and what training or preparation they believed teachers needed to incorporate graphic texts into their classrooms, Annett (2008) interviewed six middle school, high school, and university teachers who used comics or graphic novels in their classes. While three of the teachers were avid graphic novel readers, the other three reported little experience reading graphic novels, but they had a professional interest in using them as a teaching tool.

The interviews revealed the teachers employed similar resources in providing a general overview of graphic novels and for introducing vocabulary and concepts. Several used materials from the website of the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (http://www.readwritethink.org) as well as

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McCloud's (1993) *Understanding Comics.* A few researched newspapers, magazines, and academic journals for articles. Almost all used graphic novels or comics they or their students brought to class. Students' knowledge was also reported as a resource.

In analyzing the books read, the teachers all began by reviewing the concepts and vocabulary specific to graphic novels followed by asking students to identify these in their texts. Then they analyzed the graphic novels as traditional literary texts examining topics such as characters, setting, plot, and theme. Some teachers integrated techniques for analyzing film and art. All of the teachers required the students to create their own graphic texts.

With regard to what preparation was necessary to effectively incorporate graphic novels into the curriculum, the teachers in this study suggested training that included learning the vocabulary and history of comics and graphic novels. They also advised teachers to read more graphic novels to increase their familiarity and comfort with them.

Annett's (2008) study suggests that teaching graphic novels requires training beyond what English teachers learn during teacher preparation which has historically privileged print text. Expanding the concept of literacy to include multimodal literacy requires an understanding of multimodalities and how students respond to multimodal texts such as graphic novels.

The above studies presented several uses of comics and graphic novels in the classroom. The next section will summarize the educational benefits of comics and graphic novels.

Educational Benefits of Comics and Graphic Novels

There are numerous reasons to read comics and graphic novels and incorporate them in the classroom. As Krashen (2004) states, "The case for comics is a good one" (p. 109). Research and real-life experiences of teachers and librarians have proven this.

Probably the most compelling and most frequently mentioned reason for using comics and graphic novels is their ability to motivate students to read. Not only do they motivate reluctant readers to read more, but comics and graphic novel readers do at least as much reading as non-comic book readers. Research shows that comics and graphic novel readers read more overall, read more books, and have more positive attitudes toward reading (Krashen, 2004). Kittner (2008) reports that one high school librarian found that there were students she'd never seen before who came to her library purely to check out graphic novels.

Comics and graphic novels are attractive to students for several reasons including the fact that they are visual in an increasingly visual culture. This is important for students incapable of visualization as well as for visually dependent students. Visually dependent students are capable of visualization, but they prefer visuals due to their familiarity with technologies they already use such as television and the Internet (Lyga & Lyga, 2004). Comics and graphic novels act as an intermediary from the computer or television screen to books for readers comfortable with non-text visual media and therefore more comfortable reading a combination of words and pictures (Gorman, 2003). "By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read" (Yang, 2008, p. 187).

Comics and graphic novels also serve as a conduit to traditional text reading (Krashen, 2004). This does not imply that one is better than the other. Those who read comics and graphic novels and those that don't are equal in their reading and overall school achievement. Comics and graphic novels challenge and motivate high-level readers as well struggling readers (Serchey, 2008). But with struggling readers, they provide a stepping-stone to difficult disciplines and concepts (Yang, 2003).

Another way comics and graphic novels in the classroom provide a bridge is to close the separation between reading in school and out of school. They are part of popular culture and thus of high interest to students (Lyga & Lyga, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Yang, 2003). They make curriculum connections by addressing current, relevant, and complex issues (Gorman, 2003).

Comics and graphic novels can also benefit English language learners. The visuals reduce the amount of written text and provide comprehension clues. Comics and graphic novels also help ELL students learn colloquialisms and idioms, and they introduce them to pop culture (Cary, 2004; Serchey, 2008).

A final benefit of comics and graphic novels is in the development of visual literacy as students study the medium itself (McPherson, 2006; Schwarz, 2006). Schwarz (2002) states, "Graphic novels offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals" (p. 262). In reading and interpreting graphic novels, students explore not only the usual literary elements of character, plot, and dialogue, but they also explore how authors and illustrators use visual elements of color, stereotypes, perspective, and symbols to communicate ideas and stories (McPherson, 2006; Schwarz, 2006). Students need to be critical consumers of media

messages and able to appraise quality and accuracy (Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002). Graphic novels provide teachers the opportunity to help students develop multiple literacies necessary to navigate a multimodal world (Schwarz, 2006).

There are many benefits derived from using comics and graphic novels in the classroom. They motivate students to read and to read more. They act as a bridge between out of school reading and in school reading as well as a bridge to other kinds of reading. They teach multimodal literacy, and they appeal to a variety of students. There is still more to learn, though. Yang (2003) states, "The educational potential of comics has yet to be fully realized. While other media such as film, theater, and music have found their place within the American educational establishment, comics has not" (¶ 1).

Graphic novels are multimodal texts that incorporate both print and visual literacy in a unique combination. They provide a tool to help expand our concept of literacy beyond print only. To teach students to be multiliterate, to help them gain multimodal ways of knowing, is the essential task for schools in the 21st century (Miller, 2008). Understanding how students make meaning in a graphic novel will add to the knowledge of how to accomplish this task.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

This chapter explored reader response theory and semiotic theory as each pertained to comics or sequential art. It presented the history of comics and the evolution of the graphic novel and also the history of comics in education. This was followed by a discussion of recent studies of comics and graphic novels in the classroom and their educational benefits.

Because graphic novels have a short history, there are few studies on this topic. Only one study examined readers' responses to an art graphic novel. None of them addressed the question as to whether knowledge of the conventions of graphic novels affected that response or the multimodal literacy associated with graphic novels.

This study examined reader response to an art graphic novel and also determined if students recognized serious issues when presented in comic book format. It also examined if students' reading literacy extended to the conventions of graphic novels or comics and if knowledge of comic conventions affected readers' responses.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methodology and design of the study. The first section

describes the participants and my role as the researcher. The second section describes

the materials used including the graphic novel and lesson materials. The third section

discusses the pilot study and explains procedures followed for the study. The fourth

section discusses the design of the study including the issue of trustworthiness. Finally,

the last section describes the data collection and analyses.

The Participants and the Role of the Researcher

The Participants

The study took place in a 12th grade political science classroom in a high school

located in a first-ring suburb of a large midwestern metropolitan area. The school has

an enrollment of approximately 1500 students and is the only high school in a school

district that includes all of or portions of six different suburbs. The student population

is 73.7% White, 12.1% Hispanic, 9.2% Black, 4.4 % Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.6%

American Indian and 22.5% of the students receive free or reduced lunch.

The population of the class did not reflect the population of the school in terms

of diversity. Of the 27 students, 23 were White, two were Hispanic, one was Asian or

Pacific Islander, and one was Black. On a scale of four, the average GPA of the

students in the class was 2.9. Current reading scores were not available. Four students

chose not to participate in the study. This left ten girls and thirteen boys as participants.

Of these 23 participants, twenty were White students, two were Hispanic students, and

one was Asian or Pacific Islander. The average GPA of the students in the study did not differ from the average of the class.

This site was selected for several reasons. As the librarian of this high school, I had access to any classroom provided that the teacher was willing to cooperate. The principal recommended this class because it was the only section of political science and conducting a study in this one class would not affect any team teaching schedules. The political science teacher was interested in having me conduct the study in his classroom because he is also a doctoral candidate. I chose to use a class with older adolescents because these students might better understand graphic novel conventions and be cognizant of how that understanding affects their responses than younger readers. This class was neither a basic nor an advanced social studies elective used to fulfill a graduation requirement. Finally, the graphic novel selected contained issues that correlated with some of the political science curriculum, issues such as immigration, stereotyping, and racial identity.

Role of the Researcher

In my role as the librarian of this high school, I was familiar with the professional literature about graphic novels and made purchases to include them in the high school collection. I also was aware of the graphic novel circulation statistics and was curious about reader response to graphic novels.

I also teach a children's literature course and an adolescent literature course in a graduate school of library and information science at a local college. The adult student response to adjusting to the comic book format of graphic novels stirred my interest in

comics' conventions and how knowledge of those conventions affects readers' responses.

After receiving consent from the principal and the teacher to conduct the study in the political science classroom, I submitted my application to the Institutional Review Board for permission to conduct the study. Permission was granted for Category 1: Research Exempt from IRB Committee Review.

One week prior to beginning the study, I visited the classroom to request IRB consent from the students. I introduced myself, explained the study, answered any questions students had, and requested the students' participation (see Appendix A for recruitment script). Consent forms for parents to sign were given to students under the age of eighteen along with student assent forms (see Appendices B and C for consent and assent forms). Students eighteen years of age or older were given consent forms.

I requested that students return all forms to me no later than the start date of the study. Since not all students were present the day I visited the class, and in order to collect the consent and assent forms, I visited the class briefly each day before the study to recruit students who had been absent and to collect forms. Nineteen of the students were already eighteen years old and they signed and returned the forms the day they received them. Of the eight students aged seventeen, four of them did not return consent forms signed by a parent or guardian and they declined to participate in the study. After forms were collected, I signed them, made copies of each one, and returned the original to the student.

When the study began, my role in the class was as guest lecturer, or as a "participant as observer" (Creswell, 1994, p. 150) in which my observation role was

secondary to my role as a participant. On the first day I reviewed the purpose of the research and explained the procedures we would follow. I then remained in the classroom for the eight class periods of the study to observe students while they read the book and wrote responses. I also kept a daily journal of my own observations of the class.

The teacher also remained in the room to provide insights from his observations in daily interviews with me during his study hall after class. He generally sat at his desk and worked, though sometimes he walked around the room or left briefly.

The above section described the study participants and my role as the researcher. The next section will discuss the graphic novel the students read and the lesson materials.

Materials

American Born Chinese

American Born Chinese (Yang, 2006), the graphic novel selected for the study, has three plot lines that converge at the end of the book. The first story is the Chinese folk tale of the arrogant Monkey King who, unhappy as a monkey, longs to be a god. After a humbling experience, he becomes an emissary of the creator Tze-Yo-Tzuh. The second story is about Jin Wang, an Asian American middle school student trying to fit in with his classmates. He becomes best friends with Wei-Chen Sun, an immigrant from Tai-wan. The third story chronicles the trials of American teenager Danny who is visited annually by his extremely stereotyped Chinese cousin Chin-Kee. Chin-Kee embarrasses Danny so much that he must switch schools every year. At the climax, when the three stories merge, the reader learns that Danny is actually Jin Wang, Wei-

Chen is the son of the Monkey King, and Chin-Kee is the Monkey King. The novel

includes issues of immigration, culture, racial identity, and stereotyping which are

topics taught in the political science course.

Not only does this graphic novel fit into the curriculum, it was also selected

because it was the first graphic novel to be nominated for a National Book Award. It

also won the ALA's 2007 Michael L. Printz Award for excellence in young adult

literature. This acclaimed young adult literature is very realistic with its use of

language and themes and some people find parts of those books objectionable. The

stereotyping of the Chinese in *American Born Chinese* is offensive, but this was the

author's intent. In a *School Library Journal* interview, when asked about his character

Chin-Kee who is a caricature of every negative Chinese stereotype, Yang explained,

"Some people feel like just having that character there perpetuates those sterotypes. But

I wanted to show that even though in modern-day society that stereotype is inexplicit,

it's still around" (Margolis, 2006, p. 41). The only reservation I had about using this

book was that even though it is multi-layered and complex, senior students might

believe that it was written for a younger audience. This did not turn out to be the case.

Instructional Materials

A variety of instructional materials were used in the lesson about graphic novels

presented to the students. The first was a PowerPoint presentation of a brief history of

comics and how graphic novels evolved from comics (see Appendix D for a printout of

the PowerPoint presentation).

Using an LCD projection from a computer, students looked at an online version

of Gene Yang's (Yang, 2008) article entitled "Graphic Novels in the Classroom" that

appeared in *Language Arts* (see Appendix E for Yang's article). It is presented in comic book form and is described as an essay in panels. Though written for teachers, I believed that the students would enjoy it because it was written by Yang. In it he defines graphic novels, points out their ubiquity, and cites their major strengths as visual and permanent. He describes how he used comics in the classroom and suggests some graphic novels teachers may want to consider.

Students were given three handouts during the lesson. The first, from ArtBomb.net, was a short comic that defined both graphic novels and comic books (see Appendix F for the ArtBomb.net handout), explained a few comics conventions, and showed how to read a comic. The second handout was from teachingcomics.org and listed some comics' terminology with examples (see Appendix G for comics terminology handout). A bookmark I created listing a website where students could find links to online comics was the third handout (see Appendix H for the online comics bookmark).

Procedure

Pilot Study

Several months prior to the study, I conducted a pilot study with five of my student school service workers in the school library. Four of them were juniors and one of them was a senior. All but one had read graphic novels in the past, some of them regularly.

The purpose of the pilot study was to determine the appropriateness of *American Born Chinese* and the study materials as well as to establish a timeline for the study. I also wanted to analyze student written responses to the novel and to the reading survey

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for possible categories I might use during the study. From the pilot study, I learned that *American Born Chinese* was appealing to high school students, and therefore, a good choice for the study. I also learned that the ten days I had allotted for the study could be reduced to eight days because the students were able to read the book more quickly than I had anticipated.

While I didn't have the PowerPoint presentation or Gene Yang's *Language Arts* article prepared for the pilot study, the students responded well to the three handouts. Their discussion of the novel and their responses during the focus group interview were lively. The focus group interview questions remained the same from the pilot study to the study. Discussion questions were modified slightly.

Written responses to the novel indicated that the response prompts needed to be more specific to elicit some direction for the responses. During the pilot study, the response prompts were general and didn't ask questions about certain pages that would provide information about student understanding of a novel written in comic book format. Responses were similar to those of numerous reader response studies using traditional prose novels. Therefore, prompts were revised to focus attention on images and format.

Based on student responses to the reading questionnaire, it was reduced from ten questions to eight questions and the space allotted for written answers was increased.

The Study

The study was planned for eight classroom periods of 55 minutes each. However, due to state science testing, the class met for three one-period sessions, then one two-period session, skipped a day, met again for another two-period session,

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skipped a day, and concluded with a one-periods session (see Appendix I for Study Lesson Plans).

On the first day of the study, after I thanked the students for agreeing to participate in the study, I reviewed the study procedures explaining how they would read the book and write their responses. *American Born Chinese* has nine chapters and students were directed to read three chapters and write responses before continuing on with the next three chapters. After that, we would discuss the book, fill out a reading questionnaire, and then reread the book writing one final response. I would then conduct a focus group interview with a few students. The graphic novels and the response prompts focusing equally on print and image text were provided (see Appendix J for reading directions and response prompts). Laptops were available for students to use for their written responses if they wished. All students completed the assigned reading during the class period and began writings their responses. Some turned in their responses that day, and the rest were asked to turn in theirs the next day.

Because over half the students missed the first class period due to a physics field trip, the second day of the study, while students began reading the second part of *American Born Chinese,* I gave the first day's instructions to the physics students. I asked them to try to read and respond to two sections of the book by the next day. While the students read, I collected responses from some students and wrote field notes.

On the third day of the study, students who had been absent the first two days of the study were given directions and asked to try to catch up to the rest of the students. I expected that some students would finish the book and their responses before the end of this period and certainly before the four class periods allotted to read and respond.

However, the fourth period was included because I knew about the field trip before the study started and the teacher had warned me that attendance in this class was not usually 100 percent.

For students who completed the assignment early, and for any students who might be interested, I offered an optional assignment to create their own comics (see Appendix K for creating comics directions). This would provide data that could serve as a reflection of their knowledge of comic conventions. The teacher told students he would give bonus points for the comics they drew. For their comics, students could expand on any of the three story lines in *American Born Chinese,* create a comic strip about a time or event in their own lives, or make up a story. Laptop computers were available to students wishing to create comics using online tools such as *Make Beliefs Comix* (http://www.makebeliefscomix.com) or *Comic Creator* (http://www.readwritethink.org/). They also had the option to use the *Comic Life* software (Freeverse Software) installed on the laptops*,* or they could draw their own comics. Though most art graphic novels are created by auteurs, students could work in pairs if they wished. If students chose not to create their own comics, they could spend time reading additional art graphic novels I brought to class.

That day, two students began creating comics as soon as the directions were given. A few students chose to look at the art graphic novels I brought to class. As on the first two days, I circulated the classroom collecting the first two responses from students who hadn't turned theirs in yet. After that, I wrote field notes.

The fourth day of the study was a two-period class due to state science testing. The first period was time for students to complete their three written responses, create comics, or read graphic novels. Some students chose to do homework for other classes.

The second period of that day we grouped the desks in a circle for our discussion. Prior to class, I set up a video camera in the corner to capture the discussion for later transcription. I led the discussion with the teacher interjecting correlations from the book to the political science curriculum as they occurred. Questions were similar to discussion questions for any prose novel (see Appendix L for the discussion questions). I attempted to elicit responses about the quality of the book and students' reaction to the story especially with regard to the stereotyping of Chinese people and treatment of immigrants. We also looked at some of the comics conventions Yang used and students were asked to explain how they "read" pictures. Not all the discussion questions were used.

With approximately fifteen minutes left in the period, I distributed the reading questionnaire (see Appendix M for the reading questionnaire). The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine students' reading interests, previous experiences reading graphic novels, what they liked or disliked about *American Born Chinese*, and reasons for their responses. It also asked them how they made sense of the book with regard to the comic book format, how they read the graphic novel, and what they needed to know in order to read it. Questionnaires were turned in as students completed them.

The next day there was no class, but the following day was another two-period class. The first half of the period I presented a lecture on the history of comics using a PowerPoint I created (see Appendix N for lesson plan). I also showed them an article

Gene Yang wrote about graphic novels for *Language Arts.* Then I taught students about the conventions of comics and how to read them. They were given a handout from ArtBomb.net about graphic novels and another about comics' terminology to assist with understanding comics conventions. Conventions discussed included panels and gutters, borders, balloons, text boxes, lettering, sound effects, motion, and emanata. We looked at examples of the conventions in *American Born Chinese.* I provided several book talks about art graphic novels recommended for young adults such as *Blankets* (Thompson, 2003), *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003), *Age of Bronze* (Shanower, 2001), *Ghost World* (Clowes, 1998), *Castle Waiting* (Medley, 2000), and *The Plain Janes* (Castellucci & Rugg, 2007). Finally I gave students a bookmark with a website having links to online comics.

During the second half of the class, students were given directions to re-read the graphic novel as a whole and then write one final response (see Appendix O for final response prompts). The purpose of the second reading was to note if responses changed based on discussion or having engaged in a lesson about comics conventions and how to read comics. The response prompts asked students if they adopted a different approach in re-reading the novel, whether they noted different features of the novel on the second reading, and whether there were benefits for re-reading the novel. Students were asked to turn in this final response at the end of the next class period, the final day of the study.

There was no class the next day because of the double period the day before. The final day of class I brought Batman and Superman comics for the students as well as cookies to thank them for participating in the study. They were also given their copy

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of *American Born Chinese* if they wanted to keep it. About half the students chose to keep the graphic novel. I collected final responses and gave students the rest of the class period to complete final responses if they hadn't turned one in yet, create comics, or read other graphic novels.

Most students who had turned in their final responses did homework for other classes. While students worked, I contacted seven students to participate in the focus group interview. I selected these students based on their written responses and their answers to the student questionnaire. I tried to get a cross section of graphic novel readers and those who hadn't read graphic novels prior to this study. Five students agreed to participate in the focus group interview. The two who declined weren't finished with their work and wanted to complete it instead.

During the second half of the period, I conducted the focus group interview. The five students and I went to a quiet corner in the upstairs of the library where a video camera was set up to record the interview for later transcription. The teacher stayed in the classroom with the remaining students. The interview questions expanded upon the reading questionnaire (see Appendix P for focus group interview questions).

This concluded the study. Because some of the students hadn't turned in all their responses by the last class session, I returned to the class for a few days after the study to collect additional responses.

<div align="center">Design of Study</div>

The previous sections discussed the participants and the role of the researcher, the materials used in the study, and the methods of the pilot study and the methods of the study. The next section will present the design of the study.

This study adopted a qualitative design, defined by Creswell (1994) as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2). Creswell further states the basic characteristics of the qualitative approach are a study concerned primarily with process with a researcher, interested in meaning, being the primary instrument for data collection. The research involves fieldwork and is inductive and descriptive (p. 145).

Because the focus of this study was to determine students' responses to a graphic novel along with how they made meaning of a book written in comic book format, qualitative research was an appropriate choice for the design of the study. Qualitative researchers are interested in "how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world" (Cresswell, 1994, p. 145). This study fills a void in the graphic novel and comics scholarly research because there are few reader response studies in this field.

Types of data collected during the study included observations as recorded in researcher field notes and interviews with the teacher who also observed, interviews, both group and individual, documents which included the written responses of students and their reading questionnaires, and visual images of the student created comics.

Trustworthiness

Several procedures to verify trustworthiness were employed in this study to address the issues of validity and reliability. Though I didn't spend a prolonged time in the classroom site of the study, there was already a rapport between the students and me because I'd been their high school librarian for four years. For some students, I'd also

been their middle school librarian as that was a position I held prior to moving to the high school library. While I don't necessarily have a lot of contact with students as their librarian, I provide a three-day ninth grade orientation to the library for them in which I stress that one of my roles as a librarian is to help them be successful in school. I also meet periodically with classes for research purposes, and help students on an individual basis in the library. Because of previous contact with the students in helping relationships, there was already a level of trust established between myself and students which increased the trustworthiness of the data collected.

Triangulation of data also contributed to the trustworthiness of the data. Data collected from students' written responses, the reading questionnaire, and the focus group interview converged providing validity.

In addition, the coding scheme for the written responses was explained to a colleague who had completed a qualitative thesis for her Ph.D. degree. She read *American Born Chinese* and, given approximately one third of the written response data, applied the codes. The interrater reliability was 87 percent for the categories and 83 percent for the subcategories.

Data Analysis

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- How do students respond to an art graphic novel?
- How do students make meaning in a graphic novel?
- Do students possess knowledge of the conventions of graphic novels, the multimodal literacy skills or demands of comics?
- Does this knowledge of the conventions or lack thereof affect their responses?

- Do students recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format?

Data collected and analyzed were student written responses, a class discussion recorded and transcribed, a written reading questionnaire, optionally created comics, the recorded and transcribed focus group interview, interviews with the teacher, an interview with one student who created a comic, and my own daily field notes.

Both oral and written responses were coded based on categories that emerged from the data. The categories were not predetermined, but I was cognizant of coding categories used in reader response studies. After conducting the pilot study, I knew categories would be divided between literary responses that would be common to responses made to a text novel, and responses made about images that would be unique to a graphic novel. Students have experience responding to novels in the English classroom, but have not had experience responding to a graphic novel that incorporates both print and image to create a combined or new text.

The three written responses to the first reading of *American Born Chinese* were coded through a process of reduction and interpretation (Creswell, 1994). First, all of the data, the written responses, the reading questionnaires, the class discussion transcription, the interview transcriptions, and the field notes, were read to get an overall idea of student response. Then, all of the written responses were read and divided into units of analysis. These units of analysis contained a complete thought and varied in length from one sentence to several sentences. Responses were clustered into categories. Those categories were reviewed and reduced to fewer categories with some of those categories having subcategories. Then the data were reanalyzed.

Categories that were similar to the kinds of responses students make to traditional text novels were coded 1) plot, with the subcategories of retelling, interpretation, prediction, and theme; 2) opinion/evaluation; 3) connections with the subcategories of intertextual connections and personal connections; and 4) questions. The category of images, those responses triggered by an image, had the subcategories of setting, stereotyping, plot, effectiveness, and how to read images. Data were described according to categories.

Because the discussion, reading questionnaire, and the focus group interview were based on questions, the data were already organized in general categories. Responses were described according to questions asked.

The comics created by students were analyzed for comics conventions used: panels and borders, perspective, lettering, narration and captions, balloons, sound effects, time, motion, and gutters. Each comic was examined from the beginning, panel by panel, and conventions used were described.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

As stated in Chapter One, the purpose of this study was to determine how

students respond to an art graphic novel as well as how students' knowledge of the

conventions of graphic novels influences their responses. This chapter presents the

results of the study. First, data from the three written responses students made during

their first reading of *American Born Chinese* are presented followed by relative

comments from their discussion of the book. The student survey results are presented

next. Then, the responses from the students' second reading of the book are presented.

This will be followed with findings from the focus group interview. The above data is

presented in the order in which it was collected. My field notes are presented next

along with interviews with the cooperating teacher. Finally, the optional comics

students created which were turned in as completed throughout the study are presented

as well as an interview with one of the cartoonists.

Written Responses – First Reading

Of the twenty-three students who agreed to participate in the study, twenty-one

turned in written responses to the first part of the book, twenty-two turned in responses

to the second part, and twenty-two turned in responses to the third part (see Appendix J

for reading directions and response prompts). While students were provided a variety

of generic response prompts, they were also asked to address specific questions. Each

response was approximately one page long and analyzed for units of thought termed

response units. Responses units, influenced by the response prompts, were clustered

into five categories based on content, somewhat comparable to those developed by

researchers in other reader response studies with the addition of a category about

responses to images. These categories are not necessarily exclusive to each other and

three contain subcategories. Categories of responses included plot, opinion/evaluation,

connections, questions, and comments about images. Plot responses were divided into

the subcategories of retelling, interpretation, prediction, and theme. Connections

responses were classified as either intertextual or personal. Images responses were

organized into subcategories of responses about setting, plot, characters' facial

expressions or emotions, stereotypes, comic conventions, or as responses to prompts

about how to read images and the effectiveness of the images.

Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of categories for the three

responses to the first reading of the book students were asked to write.

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to First Reading of *American Born Chinese*

Response Categories	Response #1 Pages 5-52	Response #2 Pages 53-130	Response #3 Pages 131-233	Totals
Plot	43 (43.9)	53 (45.3)	65 (41.4)	161 (43.3)
Opinion/Evaluation	12 (12.2)	23 (19.7)	41 (26.1)	76 (20.4)
Connections	6 (6.1)	5 (4.3)	4 (2.5)	15 (4.0)
Questions	1 (1.0)	11 (9.4)	8 (5.1)	20 (5.4)
Images	36 (36.7)	25 (21.4)	39 (24.8)	100 (26.0)
Totals	98 (26.3)	117 (31.5)	157 (42.2)	372 (100)

Plot Responses

The majority of responses fell into the category of plot. In a graphic novel, the text and images carry the narration, though not always equally. While responses about the story plot incorporated students' understanding of text and images, if an image was not referred to directly, the response was classified in the category of plot. These responses seemed similar to responses students might make to an assigned reading of a traditional text novel, and responses were classified into four subcategories: retelling, interpretation, prediction, and theme.

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Students were given specific prompts asking them to tell or explain what was happening in the story on certain pages for each section of the book. All of these prompts pertained to the story about Jin Wang. This was an attempt to determine if students were actually considering both the text and the images to derive meaning. About 30 percent of the total plot responses were classified as retelling, 33 percent as interpretation, 18 percent as prediction, and 19 percent as theme. Table 2 below shows the frequencies and percentages of the subcategories of the plot responses.

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Subcategories of Plot Responses

Subcategories	Response #1	Response #2	Response #3	Totals
Retelling	14 (32.6)	20 (37.7)	15 (23.1)	49 (30.4)
Interpretation	4 (9.3)	19 (35.8)	30 (46.1)	53 (32.9)
Prediction	21 (48.8)	3 (5.7)	5 (7.7)	29 (18.1)
Theme	4 (9.3)	11 (20.8)	15 (23.1)	30 (18.6)
Totals	43 (26.7)	53 (32.9)	65 (40.4)	161 (100)

Retelling

Part of the response prompt for the first section of the reading asked students to explain what was happening on pages 27-29. The responses to this prompt classified as retelling showed that students clearly understood what was happening in the story. One student wrote the following:

> What is happening on pages 27-29 is that Jin Wang is sitting in a
>
> Chinese herbalist store waiting for his mom to be done with an
>
> appointment. The herbalist's wife asks Jin what he wants to be when he
>
> grows up. Jin says a transformer and the old woman tells him he can be
>
> anything he wishes as long as he's willing to forfeit his soul.

The number of retelling responses did not differ greatly across the set of responses turned in for each part of the book.

This might be accounted for because students typically respond to books by summarizing the plot. It may also reflect following the directions. All three prompts requested students to explain what was taking place in the story to determine if they understood both text and images.

Interpretation

If students attempted to explain what was happening beyond what could be concluded from the text or images, their responses were classified as interpretation. The following is an example from the same scene in the story:

> Perhaps this woman is telling Jin Wang some sort of old Chinese
>
> belief. Maybe there was once a belief that you could be anything you
>
> wished as long as you simply forgot who you were before, and forgot

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your soul. But maybe she is just telling Jin that you cannot have the

best of both worlds. He cannot become a transformer and continue to

be Jin Wang.

Interpretation responses increased from four in the first set of responses to

nineteen in the second set and thirty in the third. This was often a reflection of students'

attempts to understand what appeared to be three unconnected, parallel stories. It may

be that based on past reading experiences, they understood the stories must be

connected somehow. Initially, the only connection they attempted to find was theme.

One student wrote, "The stories are well connected and everyone seems to have some

problem with fitting in or they have some problem with trying to fit in, almost like

something/someone is getting in their way."

Another reason students' interpretation responses increased may be that as

students continued reading, learned more about the characters, and sought connections

among the stories, they gained confidence making interpretations.

Prediction

Besides asking students to explain what was happening in the story, another

prompt for the first response asked students, "What do you think this book is going to

be about? What makes you think so?" Almost all the responses classified as prediction

responses occurred in students' first responses. They may have made more predictions

after the first reading because each segment about a particular character left the reader

wondering what would happen next. It invited predictions.

One reason that the prediction responses diminished as students progressed

through the reading is that the third response was written upon completion of the book.

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There was nothing left to predict though some students noted that their predictions had been correct. Many thought the three stories would be connected somehow as shown in this response, "I predict that these stories are somehow related. I don't see why else the author would tell the stories at once." Another student wrote, "I believe the author is setting us up so all the stories will be combined into one." Only one student wrote in her third response, "After reading the end of the book, I was surprised how it all came together. I did not expect all the stories to be connected somehow."

Several students demonstrated their understanding of foreshadowing in their predictions. One student wrote, "Although he doesn't understand what she meant by 'forfeit your soul,' I believe that this is foreshadowing a time when he may betray his true self, his soul, in order to 'transform' and fit with the group."

Theme

Student responses stating underlying central ideas or common meaning in the three stories were classified as theme. Because students saw little relation between the stories in their first responses, there were few responses about theme in the first part. As they progressed in their reading, they could better understand the author's message and responses about theme increased. The following is one student's first attempt to understand the author' thematic intent:

> I think one of the things that the author is trying to tell us, especially
> with Jin Wang, is that we need to be ourselves. We may want to be a
> Transformer, but the best thing is just to be yourself. With the
> Monkey King, the author tells us that we need to be happy with the
> way we were made. We shouldn't try to be something that we are not.

By the end of the book, more than half the responses classified as theme stated

that the theme was about accepting who you are. In his final response to his first

reading of the book, a student summed up what many of the students wrote:

> The author brings out the … point that life is easier being yourself. I
>
> came to see the great lesson in this book. Anybody can be something
>
> they are not, but to truly be yourself you must be content with who you
>
> are.

Students wrote responses regarding their understanding of the stories by

retelling, interpreting, or predicting the plot. They tried to make the various

plots and their convergence meaningful by stating what they concluded was the

theme of the book. Drawing upon their experience reading traditional print

books, their responses shifted from simple retelling to more complex responses

as they advanced through the book. Because the narrative is shared by the text

and the images, both needed to be read in order to generate these responses.

Opinion/Evaluation Responses

Responses classified as opinion or evaluation expressed judgment about the

content of the stories or quality of writing. Phrases that signaled this category of

response included words such as liked/disliked, surprised, and enjoyed, or interesting,

good, and funny. These kinds of responses increased steadily as students read the book

from twelve responses to forty-one responses.

Responses about content of the stories usually referred to a character's behavior,

issues the author addressed, or the conclusion. In writing about characters, one student

wrote, "I liked how Steve was willing to sit down with Danny and listen to his story

about having to change schools every year to escape the embarrassment of Chin-Kee. He seems like a really good guy." The Monkey King was a popular character and an interesting story for the students. One wrote, "I also really liked the Monkey King. The Monkey King was awesome because really, there is nothing he can't do. He is a super monkey."

Students may have responded to characters' behavior because they've learned to judge people based on their actions rather than their looks or what they say. When meeting characters for the first time, students may hesitate to form opinions until they gather more information about that character. As they accumulate more information, their opinion/evaluation responses increased.

Several students commented about the racism and stereotyping depicted: ""Wow! Once again the stereotyping is outrageous!....The story about Chin-Kee just makes me so mad. The stereotypes are taken to such an extreme, it isn't believable anymore." Another wrote, "My reaction to this story is that it seems very stereotypical and racist. But it still remains interesting and makes you want to keep reading."

The responses indicate that the students found the Chin-Kee character offensive because he embodied racial stereotypes. Yang wanted students to think about racism and he achieved his goal (Margolis, 2006). Students noted that Chin-Kee was "obviously exaggerated" and portrayed "the absolute worst Chinese stereotype." One student wrote, "I suspect that the author uses him as a tool," to point out stereotyping.

While some students predicted that the three stories would be connected, they were still surprised at the ending. One student wrote, "I did not see anything that happened at the end coming." Another wrote, "The way they all came together was

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intense to say the least. Completely unexpected and truly entertaining." Other students expressed surprise that Chin-Kee was the Monkey King and Wei-Chen was the Monkey King's son.

The surprise students experienced may have been due to their knowledge of genre conventions. Though the Monkey King story was a folktale, the stories of Jin Wang and Danny were realistic fiction. When all three stories blended together at the conclusion, it created a fantasy that they didn't anticipate. It defied the genre conventions of realistic stories. One student responded, "In hindsight, it's still a good book and a cute story, but I don't think I could ever take it seriously, purely because of the last chapters."

The overall evaluation of the book and the comic book format was positive. Students wrote, "Before we started reading I was skeptical, but I enjoyed the book." Another wrote,

> I am overall pretty surprised how much I enjoyed the book. The idea
> of reading a graphic novel kind of turned me off at first. I did not think
> I would enjoy reading a story in comic book form, but was pleasantly
> surprised that I did in fact enjoy it!

Many students expressed surprise that they enjoyed the book. They expressed appreciation for the author's ability to tie all three stories together. They wrote, "I think that Gene Yang did an amazing job of intertwining three children's stories," and "I really like the ending of the story and how it all connected." Referring to the end of the story, one student wrote, "That was an interesting twist."

Another reason they enjoyed the book was because they finally understood how all the stories related; everything started to make sense to them. They predicted that the three plots would somehow be woven together, but they weren't exactly sure how this would be accomplished. Many responses began with the words, "I now understand," as in "I now understand why the book was telling three stories at once and kept switching between them." They could look back at details of the story and they made sense. One student wrote, "I now understand why Danny was so mean towards his cousin Chin-Kee and why Wei-Chen had that weird transformer." Another wrote, "I now understand why some of the characters had such issues with who they were and what their identity was."

Connections (intertextual/personal) Responses

The connections category comprised the least number of responses with just six students making intertextual connections to other texts and nine making personal connections. The intertextual responses were to movies, cartoons, and other books. For example, one student inferred connections between the book and movies/cartoons: "This makes me think of the countless movies/cartoons I've seen over the years where a character in the story sells his soul to the devil to achieve a certain skill or status." Another student drew a connection with a novel: "This book so far, oddly enough, reminds me of *A Daughter of Fortune,* by Isabel Allende."

Possibilities for the lack of intertextual connections might reflect students' unfamiliarity with the graphic novel format. They were unable to connect this book with other books of similar format. It could be that they've not read many books with what appear to be such disconnected stories that eventually connect at the conclusion,

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even though they anticipated the stories would connect. Also, only two students indicated they were familiar with the Chinese folktale of the Monkey King. One wrote, "I like the Monkey King story in general. I have seen a lot of takes on the Chinese folktale about the journey west, but I haven't actually heard the original, which I'll probably have to look into."

Personal responses reflected student thinking about their own behavior and how they would react in situations similar to those characters faced in the stories. The stories also reminded them of experiences in their own lives. One student wrote, "This story so far sort of brings me back to elementary school where I had to change schools….and it's hard to adapt at first." Many responses in all categories reflected students' enjoyment and appreciation of the Monkey King story. As a personal connection one girl wrote, "It is interesting to learn all these new stories from other cultures. I might major in ethnic studies in college so it's cool to me to learn traditional folklore from other countries and cultures."

Questions Responses

Questions responses were elicited from the reading directions that suggested students might complete the response prompts "Some questions I have are…" and "I'm confused about…" Only one student had a question about the first part of the reading, perhaps because the response prompt for the beginning of the book specifically asked for predictions about what would happen in the stories. Questions increased during the second part of the book focusing on characters' behavior or wondering how the stories were connected. Students asked, "I wonder what would have happened if the Great Sage had tried to go beyond the pillars?" and "I am very curious to see how Danny will

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handle this. Will he change schools?" About the three stories one student posed the question, "I'm starting to wonder why the three different stories are in the book, and if there is a point in having them together in the same book?"

At the conclusion of the book, student responses generally indicated they now understood how the stories fit together. However, one student didn't. At the end, Wei-Chen and Jin Wang are reunited. This student wrote, "My reaction to this ending is that I still don't understand how it relates to the other story [Monkey King story]." Other students were puzzled by certain aspects of the plot. About the Monkey King story, one student wrote, "I wonder why the Monkey King never thought to try to return to his original form before Won Lai-Tsao showed up." Another wrote, "I just don't really understand why Wei-Chen would still want to live on earth when he called them pretty soulless." That students had so few questions, less than six percent of the responses, may indicate they understood the book as a whole.

Images Responses

Responses to images constituted a little over twenty-five percent of the total responses. Some of these responses could have been classified in other categories, but they were classified in the images categories because the response directly referred to an image or was a response triggered by an image. Several response prompts specifically asked about the images. Images responses were classified as responses about setting, plot, characters' facial expressions or emotions, stereotypes, comics conventions, or as responses to prompts about how to read images and the effectiveness of the images. Table 3 below shows the frequencies and percentages of the

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subcategories of the images responses. The images carried much of the narration of the stories and students had to read the images for understanding.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Subcategories of Images Responses

Subcategories	Response #1	Response #2	Response #3	Totals
Setting	4 (11.1)	6 (7.7)	1 (2.6)	7 (7)
Plot	2 (5.6)	6 (23.1)	23 (60.6)	31 (31)
Facial Expressions	3 (8.3)	9 (34.6)	7 (18.4)	19 (19)
Stereotypes	17 (47.2)	0 (0)	3 (7.9)	20 (20)
Comics Conventions	2 (5.6)	6 (23.1)	2 (5.3)	10 (10)
Reading Images	3 (8.3)	0 (0)	1 (2.6)	4 (4)
Effectiveness	5 (13.9)	3 (11.5)	1 (2.6)	9 (9)
Totals	36 (36)	26 (26)	38 (38)	100 (100)

Setting Images

Sometimes a narration box indicated the setting of a particular scene, but most often the setting was depicted in the panel images only, at times by large splash panels. As opposed to a long text description one student wrote, "The author tells us the setting in a different way than I am used to." Students seemed to find this helpful as indicated by the following response: "The author lets the reader know about the setting by using the descriptive pictures. The pictures are very descriptive."

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Yang presents the Chin-Kee story as a sitcom (Engberg, 2007). Chin-Kee appears in what looks like a television screen on the back cover of the book and in his story there are laugh tracks and clap tracks along the bottoms of the panels. One student questioned what the "clap, clap, clap" meant, but others picked up on the author's intention. One student mentioned the "ha, ha, has" and writes, "The story is supposed to be in the same flavor as a sitcom." Another student thought the sitcom setting really emphasized Chin-Kee's exaggerated stereotype. He wrote, "The use of pictures …really emphasized how far out and unrealistic the character is. The sitcom setting does a good job of that too. It quickly becomes clear that Chin-Kee is not to be taken literally."

The Chin-Kee story is supposed to be a sitcom. In a *Booklist* interview, Yang explains why he presents Chin-Kee in a sitcom world. "Iconically, the sitcom family is the ideal American family, in which the characters are living ideal American lives, things get solved within half an hour, and everything's funny. I think in lots of ways that that's what Asian American kids strive for" (Engberg, 2007, p. 75). The sitcom world was portrayed more efficiently through images than it would have been with words alone. Students recognize the trappings of sitcoms. The author not only presented an easily recognizable setting, but he was also able to convey the idea that because it was a sitcom, it was unrealistic.

Plot Images

The story action is told through text and images, and sometimes just through images as on pages 82 and 83. In a series of panels, a bridge crumbles under the Monkey King and he falls to land under a mountain of rocks. As one student wrote,

"The pictures tell me what is happening." In another panel, wordless but for the Monkey King saying his name, Danny transforms back to Jin Wang. The panel shows five faces changing from Danny's face to Jin Wang's. One student wrote, "Jin changed his nationality as well as his skin color and the color and shape of his eyes."

Figure 1 below shows the Monkey King on his journey to the West. The text in the panel states only, "-since the completion of my test of virtue, my journey to the West," yet a student described it as follows:

It was interesting seeing Christian references in a book about Chinese people. Wong Lai-Tsao was to gather three disciples and follow a star westward to present three gifts. As we see on page 215, the star is the star above Bethlehem, marking the birth of Christ. The three disciples are the Magi from the East. That means that the three packages were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That was very interesting.

Figure 1
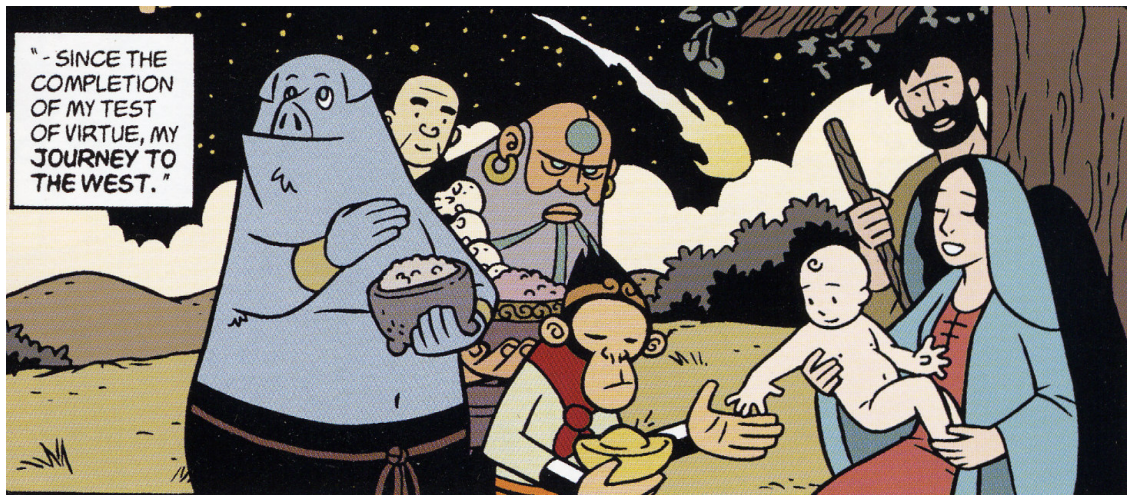
Another student wrote something similar.

>   When the monkey talks about his completion of the journey to the
>
>   West the graphics reminded me of the Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus
>
>   story. The three packages the disciples had to carry seemed symbolic of
>
>   gold, frankincense and myrrh that the three kings brought to Jesus.

While not specifically stated in the text, these responses seem an accurate interpretation

of the panel indicating students had the ability to grasp the meaning without words.

Facial Expressions or Emotions

Several students commented about the facial expressions of characters. One

student wrote, "The pictures really helped me a lot in this reading because they showed

facial expressions." Another wrote, "The pictures are a great way to tell a story. You

can tell the character's emotions without saying what they are feeling."

Students were able to read characters' emotions from the images. As with

setting, there wasn't a need to read a text description. One student describes a

character's feeling in the following quote: "On page 214, the author is showing that Jin

is very confused and dazed about what happened to him….you can tell by the

expression on his face in the picture." Another student describes a different scene.

>   On page 229 when it shows Wei-Chen in his true form, you just get
>
>   the impression that he doesn't want to be the way he is. Something
>
>   about the look on his face just gives one that idea, which is one
>
>   reason why this works as a graphic novel.

Eisner (1985) states that the face is the one part of the anatomy that invites the

most attention and involvement. As humans, we are drawn to each other's faces. Facial

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expressions sometimes deny a person's words and this can be depicted very effectively

through the images of a graphic novel. Simmons (2003) writes, "The…art within a

graphic novel supplies germane aspects of the narrative that the words do not….The

ability to 'read' images that portray character, mood, and tone must be developed

through experience" (p. 12). Students' ability to read facial expressions transferred to

their ability to read faces in the graphic novel.

Stereotypes

Students appreciated the effect the images had on them. They understood that

the author was trying to shock the reader with his stereotypical depiction of Chin-Kee.

In Figure 2 we are introduced to Chin-Kee when he arrives to visit his cousin Danny.

Figure 2

Students wrote, "The pictures are portraying the absolute worst Chinese stereotype they can, buck teeth, facial structure, Chinese clothes, and a heavy Chinese accent, and the fact that his name is Chinky, it just does more to emphasize the character;" "No real person could be nearly as cartoony and fake as the Chinese stereotype implies;" and "I understand that it is being used to evoke these feelings but I hate it." This was obviously Gene Yang's intention to evoke these critical responses.

Chin-Kee is not the only character stereotyped in the book. When Wei-Chen decides to no longer be an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh, he assumes a new persona as shown in the panels of Figure 3 and Figure 4. One student describes him as a "stereotypical bad boy." Another writes,

> The Wei-Chen stereotype at the end really hit home since I know a lot of Asian Americans that fit it almost completely: fast car (usually a Civic) with racing stickers, large diamond earrings, lots of other "bling," smoke cigarettes, big sun glasses, always speaking their native language if the other person understands, and sports jacket.

Figure 3

Figure 4

Comics Conventions

Students didn't mention comics conventions very much in their first reading of the book. One reason for this is that they had not learned about these conventions until the lesson following the reading. However, some still noted conventions within the images in their responses to the second part of the book. These responses were elicited by the reading prompt directing them, "Look at pages 100-105. What is going on here? Explain how you know this."

One student wrote that Wei-Chen and Amelia get locked in a closet. She writes, "You can tell this by the click sound effect the author adds, the dialogue, and that they're waiting for awhile because the clocks had different times." The use of clocks to show the passage of time is a common comics convention.

In those same pages, Jin Wang remembers asking Amelia to hang out with him. "On pages 104-105, I thought it was interesting the way the edges of the pictures are

blurred to give the feeling of a patchy memory," wrote one student. And another

student wrote of the same scene, "Once Jin finds the two he shows that Jin's memory

was a blur by whiting the edges so it looks like something out of a dream." This

technique might not be a common comics convention, but students noted it and

understood what the author was attempting to convey.

Reading Images

The prompt for the first written responses asked students, "How do you read

these pictures?" There were only four responses to this question and they indicated

different styles of reading. One student wrote, "I read these pages by first glancing at

the picture, then reading the text, then glancing back at the picture for anything I might

have missed." Another student felt the images slowed her down. She wrote,

> I often did not look at all of the pictures on any given page until I was
>
> finished reading all of the text on the page. I feel like stopping after
>
> each box to look at the picture is too time consuming. Looking at each
>
> picture would inhibit my processing the story.

While there are recommended ways to read comics (Abbott, 1986; McCloud, 1993;

Rudiger, 2006), students appeared to use a variety of ways to read the graphic novel.

Effectiveness of images. It is clear from the examples above that students were

able to read images and derive meaning of the story through the images, particularly

with regard to setting, plot, character's emotions, and stereotypes. One student

expressed the need to examine the images closely.

> One thing I like about the book so far is the pictures. They are
>
> interesting because if you don't look closely you miss a lot. Although

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the words seem to tell the story it is really the pictures that give the

most detail and understanding to the story.

Another student compared the graphic novel to a traditional text. "The use of

pictures in my opinion is actually pretty cool. I think it helps me follow along in the

story and really is just a good change of pace from reading a traditional style novel."

This quote from another student sums up the benefits of images. "You can say a lot

through a simple picture."

Students' written responses to their first reading of the graphic novel were much

like responses they would have written about any assigned classroom novel. Without

the prompts asking specifically about the images, however, there may not have been as

many comments written about the artwork.

<p align="center">Student Discussion Responses</p>

The students and I discussed the book after they completed their first reading

and turned in their three written responses (see Appendix L for discussion questions).

Because of state testing, this was a two-hour class period, so students spent the first

hour finishing their reading of *American Born Chinese* and writing their responses.

This allowed students who'd been absent during the first three days of the study to catch

up, and it allowed others time to read other graphic novels I brought to class or to create

their own comic.

The discussion was videotaped for later transcription. While most of the

students were present for the discussion, few actually participated. Topics discussed

included literary elements of a novel relating to plot, characters, foreshadowing and

theme, issues of immigration concerning racism and stereotyping, and comments about

the artwork, much of it about stereotyping. These were often similar to their written responses.

I opened the discussion by asking, "Do you have any comments, opinions, questions, reactions to the story that you'd like to discuss?" It wasn't surprising that they began with the ending of the book since they just finished reading it. The general feeling was that the end was a bit abrupt. One student commented, "Kind of annoyed me that the separate stories were long. Went too fast at the end…could have been developed if it was prose, more details." Another enjoyed the book but said, "The end was really rushed. It didn't make it a bad story, but it could have been a little better. But, I thought it was really good."

When asked if they saw any relation between this book and things they'd studied in class, they connected it with their unit on immigration. When Jin Wang begins at a new school after his family moves from San Francisco, his teacher introduces him to the class and tells them he's come all the way from China. A student remarked, "Yeah, like they just assumed he was from China….Someone who looks different must be from a different country."

Students were surprised at the obvious stereotyping Yang included. They commented about the pages on which the character Chin-Kee is introduced:

S1: Talk about cultures clashing. I don't know, um, page 51 quote about American bosoms. Like here, that would be considered really inappropriate. It kind of catches you off guard.

S2: I was kind of shocked with the stuff the author chose to include.

HH: What shocked you?

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S2:   Dog part. Girls should be married, their feet bound. And just the

stereotypes he chose, almost satirical.

They continued listing all the stereotypes of Chinese people Chin-Kee embodied: "He answers all the questions in class," "His clothes, very traditional," "His eyes," "Buck teeth, yellow skin," "Strange lunch," "Rs and Ls."   One student said, "He always uses like Chinese proverbs. Kind of reminds me like old Kung Fu movies you see on TV. The grand master would always talk like that."

Much of what the students noted about the stereotyping was depicted in Yang's artwork. When I asked if the stereotyping would be as effective, as shocking, if it wasn't in graphic novel form, they responded "No," as a group. One student continued, "No, you have to take in the pictures, the visuals."

They noted two other instances of stereotyping other than Chin-Kee. When Wei-Chen decides to stop being an emissary for Tze-Yo-Tzuh, he becomes what one student described as a "stereotypical Asian-American" with a "great car, loud music." That Wei-Chen drives a fancy car, wears jewelry and sunglasses, and smokes is all read in the images, not the text.

Another example is shown in Figure 5. One student thought Yang was stereotyping a typical American girl:

If you look at the girl, you've got blonde hair, tons of makeup and huge

lips. And I think that's stereotyping. They're making fun of us because

everyone's doing that now. So, I think its poking fun at our society and

how we behave.

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Figure 5

Students believed that all the stereotyping focused the reader on the theme of the book which one student described as "Appearances. The whole book is about appearances." In reference to the stereotyping of the American teenager, another student stated, "Another message about appearance, covering up what we look like."

Before asking students how they read graphic novels, how they read the pictures, I polled them as to how many had read a graphic novel before. Only two hands went up. When asked how many students regularly read comics in the newspaper, four said they did.

In answer to the questions whether the artwork aided comprehension or added to the story, students responded that it provided detail, especially facial expressions and emotions of characters. The conversation about facial expressions and emotions continued in answer to the questions, "How do you go about reading a graphic novel? How do you read the pictures?" One student said, "It's kind of like multitasking, I guess, like read, get emotions, kind of like multitasking." Another student added,

I guess I have a little more experience reading graphic things and it kind of helps me to get the emotions that, like how they're speaking, but seeing how their faces look and like what actions they're doing. So, I'm like, at the same time, reading, looking at the faces and surroundings. Sometimes a lot of the jokes are sort of in the facial expressions, too."

One girl described her technique for reading graphic novels:

When I look at a page, I always glance over the pictures and then read the text, and then look at each individual picture after I finish the page. To me, it's too much to look at each individual picture while reading the text. Right after I take it all in as one sequence.

With few comics readers and even fewer graphic novel readers in the class, students didn't comment about comics conventions specifically. One student, however, using both text and image to recognize foreshadowing, described some comics conventions in the panel in Figure 6. He believed that the image involved foreshadowing when the herbalist's wife told Jin Wang he could be anything he wished provided he was willing to forfeit his soul. He explained his reasoning, "I guess the fact that it became like dark and the words were bolded, it felt like it was more important….You're like, that's going to be important because of how they present it." The close-up of the face, the black background without any distractions, and the bolded text are all techniques comics artists use for emphasis.

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Figure 6

Though few students actually spoke during the discussion, those that didn't offer comments often mumbled agreement with those that did. The discussion confirmed some of what students wrote in their written responses. After the discussion, students filled out a student survey.

Student Survey Results

Following the discussion, students had approximately fifteen minutes to complete a survey. After a few general questions about reading and the kinds of reading they enjoyed, students were asked one specific question about reading *American Born Chinese* and several questions about graphic novels (see Appendix M for the reading questionnaire). This section presents the results of the survey.

All of the students that agreed to participate in the study completed the survey, though some were absent the day the survey was distributed and they filled it out later.

When asked if they read for pleasure, seventeen of the twenty-three students answered yes and listed a variety of kinds of reading they enjoyed including novels, nonfiction, newspapers, magazines, and online websites. The six that didn't enjoy reading indicated they had no time for it or they would just rather be doing something else.

Only seven of the students had read a graphic novel prior to reading *American Born Chinese.* Of those seven, three had read all three kinds of graphic novels: mainstream, manga, and art. Two students read just mainstream or superhero graphic novels; one read just manga; and two read just art graphic novels. After reading *American Born Chinese,* nineteen of the students indicated they would be interested in reading more graphic novels. Twelve of the sixteen students who had never read a graphic novel before were now interested in reading more.

The following sections present the results of the open-ended questions of the survey.

Question Four: What did you like or not like about reading American Born Chinese?

When asked what they liked and disliked about reading *American Born Chinese,* only five students expressed any dislikes with four of them complaining about the ending. They felt it was rushed. One student didn't like how the stories kept alternating, but she did like the ending. She wrote, "At first I didn't like how the story switched right in the middle, but the purpose was clear at the end when the characters came together."

The students did like the format, the artwork, and the story itself. What they liked best about the format - the combination of text and images, was how quickly they could read the book. It was a unique experience for them to read a graphic novel. One

student summed it up this way: "I liked the format and that it was quick, easy, and interesting. It was very different from the stuff I am used to reading in school; it was a good change of pace."

What students appreciated about the artwork included the detail providing much information in a small space. One wrote, "I liked that I didn't have to read pages worth of imagery descriptions, and that the imagery was actually memorable." They liked seeing facial expressions and emotions portrayed. The racial stereotyping seemed real to them. "I think he used real stereotypes and real issues in the book, and it was good to see." Another student wrote, "I liked the visuals and all the attention it gave to racial comments and stereotypes," even though the images and situations made her uncomfortable. One student compared the graphic novel to other texts:

> Although it feels like we've been taught not to stereotype hundreds of
> times, the story made it a more powerful lesson. The consequences were
> visual, it was really happening and we could see that as opposed to a
> lecture or even a conventional story with just words.

Finally, the students liked certain aspects of the story. They liked that it was three seemingly unrelated stories that connected at the end. They liked that one of the stories took place in a high school setting to which they could relate. They also liked the message or theme. They enjoyed the book and said it was interesting.

Question Five: How did you make sense of the book? What was more important: text,
images, or a combination? Please explain.

In making sense of the book, students were asked what was most important: text, images, or a combination of text and image. The majority, fifteen students, found

the combination of text and image helped them make the most sense of the story. One

student wrote, "You get multiple ways in which to take in information." This was most

useful in understanding emotions and tone: "You had to look at the reactions and

images in the pictures to fully understand what was meant by the dialogue." Another

wrote, "You have to read not only their words but their body language and facial

expressions as well."

Five students thought that the images were the most helpful in making meaning

due to the detail they provided that the limited text did not: "I believe the pictures are

the most important because many key facts were not in the text."

Only two students believed that the text was the most important for their making

sense of the book, though one conceded the pictures provided good information. One

student who is not an experienced graphic novel reader noted: "I made the best sense I

could mostly in the words. It seems like most of the time I read the words, maybe

because I'm not used to having pictures in my reading."

Most students believed that a combination of the text and image was most

helpful in creating meaning. Eisner (1996) states that no one really knows for certain

whether the words or the pictures are read first in comics. There is no evidence they are

read simultaneously and reading each requires a different cognitive process. However,

students were able to articulate their procedure for reading a graphic novel.

Question Seven: How do you read a graphic novel? Please explain your procedure.

A few students described a general approach of just reading from left to right, up

to down. It was almost evenly divided between students who claimed they read the text

first and then looked at the pictures and those who looked at the pictures first. One

wrote, "When I read a graphic novel I first look at the pictures. Once I'm done looking

at the pictures I look at the reading, then the pictures again." More of these students

scanned the page first, absorbing the pictures quickly, then read the text before going

back to examine the panels more closely. A student using this approach wrote, "I take a

quick glance at the picture, read the text, then glance back at the picture for anything I

might have missed, then go on to the next panel."

Students seemed to know the ground rules for reading comics. Yang's graphic

novel did not include radical or erratic panel layouts, so reading from right to left and

top to bottom was correct. It appears to be a personal preference as to whether a reader

looks at the pictures first or reads the text first. What was apparent from the students'

responses was that they understood the importance of attending to both the images and

the text, recognizing that the images carried some of the narration. Whether they gave

one more priority than the other, no one neglected either element.

Question Eight: What things do you need to know how to do in order to understand

graphic novels?

The last question of the survey asked students what they need to know in order

to understand graphic novels. Five students didn't see a need to know anything in

particular. One wrote, "I think if you've read books long enough there isn't really

anything special you need to know, just common sense." Most students thought that

readers needed to understand the format and know how to read images. One indicated it

was important to actually look at the pictures, not skip over them. The rest felt the

pictures needed to be interpreted so you could understand facial expressions and the

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effect of panel backgrounds. Though only one student stated, "You need to know how to multitask," that student seemed to grasp an important skill for multimodal literacy.

Written Responses – Second Reading

Two days after the discussion and survey were completed, we had another two-hour session due to state testing. During the first hour I taught a lesson about graphic novels which included a brief history of comics and a presentation of comics conventions and how to read comics. Students were then instructed to read *American Born Chinese* a second time and write a final response to the book. Students had an hour during class to read. Because of the two-hour class period that day, class wouldn't meet the next day. This allowed students enough time to write their final responses before the last day of the study.

The final response prompt asked students to explain if they changed their method of reading a graphic novel, if they noticed anything about the text or images during the second reading that they didn't notice during the first reading, and if they thought there were any benefits to reading the book a second time (see Appendix O for final response prompts). Seventeen of the twenty-three students turned in final written responses.

Reading Method on the Second Reading

More than half the students, eleven of the seventeen, claimed there was no change in their method of reading the book a second time. Four of these students claimed this was due to their experience reading comics. One wrote, "From the beginning I had a strong sense of how to read the book because of my previous experience." Another wrote "I've read some comics in the past and felt like I had a

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good understanding of the conventions of graphic novels." Even though one of these four didn't think he'd changed the way he read the second time, he did write, "The second time through, I tried to slow down and pay more attention to the pictures, since I tend to miss little things in the backgrounds."

Three other students who asserted they'd not changed their reading method did admit they paid more attention to the images during their second reading. One wrote, "As I reread *American Born Chinese* I did not change my method of reading the graphic novel except to linger just a bit longer on the pictures." These students felt they gained a few more details by reading the book a second time.

The rest of the students believed that they changed their method when they reread the book. One wrote, "I really think my method of reading changed when I totally understood how these novels worked. When I first read this it was my first time ever reading a story like this." Another student had been a bit confused during the first reading.

> The first time I read it the order confused me a little. I didn't know which box to go to every time. Once I found out how to go through graphic novels, it just started to flow, with occasional stops to look at the images more closely.

While some of these students believed that they read the book faster the second time, they also indicated they gained a few more details, usually from studying the images more closely. "When I reread the book I did change my method of reading. As I read I paid more attention to pictures and facial expressions."

Whether students claimed to change their method of reading or not, most of them admitted that they gained more information from studying the images when they read the book a second time. While it was stated that images and text share narrative responsibility in a graphic novel during the lesson presented in class, examples of comics conventions were pointed out during the lesson and the class discussion. Students realized that they missed some information contained in the images during their first reading, so during their second reading, they paid closer attention to the images.

New Information

Only three students responded that they gained no new information during their second reading. The rest of the students believed that they gained additional insight or information based on our discussion of the book or the lesson about how to read comics and comics conventions. One student wrote that she "picked up on the themes" and understood the author's message better. Another student wrote, "There definitely were a few things that made more sense."

Many students noticed more details in the pictures. Some of these details were facial expressions and emotions. "The second time through allowed me to notice how the pictures really emphasize emotion that little words can't." Some of the details noticed added humor to the story.

On the second time through the book, I noticed some details that I had overlooked. On page 80, when Tze-Yo-Tzuh was talking with the Monkey King on the bridge of stone, he was looking at his hand where

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the Monkey King had defiled the pillars. Then he wiped his hand on his

robe to clean it.

Students inferred connections between the stories they hadn't noticed before, some of which involved foreshadowing, as can be seen from the entry below.

For example, when Wei-Chen stayed after to help Amelia with the

animals, the monkey grabs Wei-Chen. Before I never though anything of

it, but now I know it's because he is the son of the Monkey King.

Another example would be when Wei-Chen first arrived and he had that

toy with that transformed into a monkey. Wei-Chen told Jin that his

father gave it to him so he wouldn't forget where he came from. It all

makes sense now.

Students also noted how the discussion had helped them understand the story better when they read it a second time. However, much of the new information cited was based on the mini-lesson about comics conventions and how to read comics.

The things I noticed were mainly text and image changes. After

the…lesson about comics and graphic novels I noticed when the author

changed text or decided not to have a border or things of that sort.

Noticing these changes the second time around helped me understand

why the author chose to do it and how it affects the novel as a whole.

With regard to text, students noticed that narration was in rectangular boxes, usually at the top of a panel. One student noted how volume is depicted. He wrote, "I also noticed now text seemed to get bigger when the voice of the character was raised." Other students mentioned the speech balloons. One student wrote about the scene in the

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movie theater with Jin Wang and Amelia. The speech balloons are outlined in broken lines to indicate whispering which is a common comics convention. He wrote, "I think that I inferred that they were whispering because of the pictures and not the speech bubbles the first time." Referring to thought balloons with cloud-like borders, a student wrote, "There were a few times when I hadn't noticed that a word balloon was not someone saying something." Finally, one student admitted that when there was no text, she "actually paid attention…and noticed what was happening in the picture, even if it was just scenery." Text features and balloons were included in the Comics Terminology handout (see Appendix G for comics terminology handout) presented during the lesson. Examples from *Chinese Born American* were examined during the discussion.

Panels were another feature of the comics format observed. For one of the experienced comics readers in the class, he didn't gain new information from reading the book a second time, but he gained terminology from the lesson. He wrote, "The lesson helped me with terminology, though. I never knew that a splash panel was called a splash panel or what the name of a bleed was." Another student hadn't noticed that the sizes of panels changed as well as the layout.

Based on the discussion and the lesson presented in class, students understood the story better during the second reading. Some of the increased understanding was a result of learning about comics conventions authors use.

Benefits of a Second Reading

About one third of the students who responded didn't think there were any benefits to reading *American Born Chinese* a second time. They indicated that it was

boring because they already knew what was going to happen. One wrote that he preferred to read new books, and another wrote that she never really read books a second time, but reading this book a second time "did make me a little more anxious to read a different graphic novel." The only reasons these students believed a book should be read second time were if it was a really good book, if you had to write a research paper about it, or if you were going to be tested about the book.

The rest of the class identified several benefits of a second reading. For some, the benefits of rereading a graphic novel were similar to the benefits of rereading a traditional text novel such as a better understanding of character development, foreshadowing, and theme.

Others believed that a second reading provided an opportunity to notice details they missed during the first reading. "Before writing this response, I would have said that there is no benefit to reading something again. However, now I would say that you can miss quite a bit of info the first time you read something." Students wrote that during the second reading they looked at the pictures more carefully and noticed emotions or facial expressions missed initially.

For one student, the benefit of a second reading helped her understand how comics work, "how the pictures and texts work together and how it completes the story."

In their responses to their second reading of *American Born Chinese,* students answered the questions of the response prompts and also wrote some additional comments, many of the comments about having enjoyed the graphic novel experience. However, one response worth noting was about difficulties immigrant children face in

adjusting to a new culture without losing their identity, all the while confronting

prejudice. This student wrote the following:

At first I didn't take it seriously because it was a comic book to me.

But after I read it I found it profound and there were topics that I could

relate to as well as very contradicting topics that made you choose sides.

The instruction and the discussion made students more aware of comics

conventions and how comics work. They realized that reading comics wasn't the same

as reading traditional print text and this was reflected in their responses to the second

reading of the book. Some students who were hesitant about reading a graphic novel

overcame their reluctance and might read another one in the future. If any of the

students do read another graphic novel, they may read it a little more slowly, focus a

little more attention on the images, and perhaps even reread parts of it for meaning.

Focus Group Interview

On the last day of the study, I gave students cookies and Batman and Superman

comics to show my appreciation for their participation in the study. During this class

period, students had time to finish up their final responses and I asked seven students to

partake in a focus group interview. I selected these students before class based on the

content of their written responses and the reading survey. I sought to balance graphic

novel readers with non-graphic novel readers and include students who had written

thoughtful responses. Two students declined to participate because they weren't quite

finished with their final written responses.

The five students that agreed to participate in the focus group had a cumulative

grade point average of 3.272 on a scale of 4.0. The scores ranged from 3.128 to 3.489.

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Mark and Eric were experienced comics and graphic novel readers. Both indicated they'd read manga, mainstream, and art graphic novels as well as web comics. According to the survey, Pam, Jason, and Amanda had never read a graphic novel before.

We left the classroom to hold the focus group interview in a quiet corner on the second floor of the school library. I opened by asking students what they knew about graphic novels prior to participating in the study (see Appendix P for focus group interview questions). Amanda said, "Absolutely nothing," Later she added, "I knew it was out there. I just didn't know what it was called." Later, she said she'd heard about *Maus.* However, when I first mentioned graphic novels to the class, Amanda thought it meant books with lots of action, sex, and violence.

Jason believed that all graphic novels were about superheroes, though he said he'd heard of *Maus* also. He said, "I didn't know it was a comic book." Pam, though she'd indicated on her survey that she'd never read a graphic novel before, had read *Persepolis.* She said, "But, I didn't know what it was." The term "graphic novel" was new to them.

Mark and Eric were the experienced graphic novel readers. Both read quite a bit of manga, and Mark had done an anime project in eighth grade. (Anime are Japanese cartoons as opposed to Japanese manga or graphic novels.) Eric said he knew graphic novels existed; he just didn't know there were so many out there. He hadn't heard of *American Born Chinese* and said, "I just didn't know all about the sort of literary ones."

When asked if they thought graphic novels were popular in their high school, an interesting discussion developed about the kinds of students who read graphic novels.

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Amanda felt that manga was more popular and when pressed why, she said

stereotypical kids were reading it. Mark, Jason, and Eric agreed. Pam was quiet in this

group. She didn't contribute unless asked a specific question.

Amanda: Stereotypical kids are reading it, like…

Eric: Japanese kids and kids who are living in their parents'

            basement? Thanks!

Amanda: Kids who are like, "Oh, I don't read typical stuff."

Jason: They say like, "You don't understand."

Amanda: Exactly! It's like almost emo.

Mark: I think they do it 'cause they think they're special. A lot of it

            is for attention.

Amanda: "You don't understand me. Therefore, I'm going to read

             something you couldn't possibly understand."

Mark: Yeah.

HH: Jason, how about you. What do you think?

Jason: Well, popularity-wise? I don't think it would be very popular,

            graphic novels. I don't see too many reading it other then emo

            kids.

HH: Emo?

Amanda: Emotional dependent/defiant. Emotions define us. Kids who

            wear black and have their hair swept over their face and dye it,

            straighten it.

HH: Like what we used to call Goths?

Amanda: Basically, it evolved from Goths.

Mark: New age Goths. It's for attention.

Amanda: Yeah, new age. And they have like their own lingo.

Mark: A lot of them cut themselves for attention. That's a horrible

          stereotype, but we're stereotyping as it is by calling them emo,

          so might as well just extend on that.

Amanda: That's kind of the intense emo. And then there's emo that,

          they have the appearance and they're just like…

Mark: Those are called scene kids most of the time.

Amanda: Yeah, scene kids is what it's called now. Like "I'm seen."

HH: Scene?

Amanda: S-C-E-N-E.

Mark: They've got the hairstyle, but they're not all gothic.

HH: Okay, like you're making a scene.

Eric: Or you're on the scene.

The students believed that there was a stigma to reading graphic novels which

contributed to its lack of popularity. Amanda noted that someone saw her reading

American Born Chinese in school and asked, "Reading a comic? Seriously?" When

she responded that it was a graphic novel, the other student said, "Right." Mark thought

that the comic stigma dissuaded peopled from reading graphic novels. Given the choice

between a graphic novel or another kind of book, people would select one they

wouldn't "get laughed at for." Amanda added, "Once you get past a certain age, you're

not supposed to read a book with pictures. You're supposed to grow up, read books with text."

Asked what they thought of graphic novels now that they'd experienced them, Jason responded that while he liked *American Born Chinese,* he didn't think he'd read too many more graphic novels. He conceded he might read *Maus* and maybe something about World War II.

The rest of the students were interested in reading more graphic novels. Eric stated, "I guess I'm actually interested now….I wouldn't have been before this." The fact that graphic novels encompassed all genres made Amanda want to read more of them. Pam said her friend had shown her a graphic novel she would like to read. Mark thought he'd read more also because they were a quick read.

When asked if they'd learned anything new from the lesson about graphic novels and comics terminology, they didn't indicate they learned anything that changed their reading, other than information about graphic novels conventions. Mark said, "I didn't know about that gutter thing or any of those little inside things that you don't really pay attention to. They don't really affect the reading that much." Amanda added, "Obviously something happens between there and you just know. It's kind of human instinct what happens between panels." Eric said, "We got a lot of terminology." None of the students could think of a use for knowing comics conventions other than for reading graphic novels and comics.

The students noted that including graphic novels in the curriculum would be "pretty sweet." Jason said, "I like that idea better than reading those boring novels that I don't like." Amanda thought graphic novels would be especially appropriate for

younger high school students and basic classes because they are more engaging. She did concede she would like reading them in advanced classes. Mark felt there shouldn't be a push to get them in the classroom. "I think if it fits, that would be great. But if you really just try to fit it in and go out of your way to put it in there, because it was it's the hot topic."

After I explained how film was not accepted as a classroom tool in its early stages, I wondered aloud if graphic novels were experiencing that same resistance. Eric expressed a concern that graphic novels would replace traditional books. He thinks students might prefer the more visual graphic novel, just as they seem to prefer film versions of books: "I'm just a little scared it might end up replacing…" Mark didn't think so. He reassured Eric, "We have so many options to read online now, yet people still go and buy books and borrow books from the library."

Only Jason believed that graphic novels were a fad or a trend. The rest of the students believed they were here to stay.

> Eric: It's starting off slow and people are kind of skeptical. But, I
>   think it will pick up.
>
> Mark: I think it has enough of a following already, so it's not going to
>   die out anytime soon. It will definitely grow in popularity.
>
> Pam: I think it will stay.
>
> Amanda: I think it will stay, but I don't know how big it will get. I don't
>   think it's going to be Oprah's Book Club.

Field Notes and Teacher Interviews

One week before I began the study, I went into the classroom to request student consent to participate. After explaining the study, its purpose, and their role as participants, I distributed both consent and assent forms. Most of the students were already eighteen years old and they signed the consent forms and returned them that day. I stopped by the class each day afterwards to collect the rest of the forms. Only four students declined to participate. I did not question why. They understood that they would still need to do the same work the study participants did; I would just not use their data in the study.

Throughout the study, I kept daily field notes which I wrote during the class period if students were reading or immediately afterwards when I returned to my office. The teacher remained in the classroom working quietly at his desk while I was there. Each day of the study I interviewed him one hour after class while he supervised a study hall.

Before the study began, the teacher warned me that attendance in this class was never 100 percent. That was to prove true. On the first day only eleven students were present due to a physics field trip. Because I knew about the attendance issue and the field trip before the study began, I built in an additional day for students to complete work.

The first day of the study was a Wednesday in the middle of May. I suggested students preview the book before they began reading it. I was pleased with their apparent interest in reading. Students needed only about fifteen minutes to complete the pages assigned for the first written response. I brought a portable computer lab to the

classroom, and many students used the laptops to write their responses. Six turned in responses by the end of the period.

During the interview after class, the teacher wondered if the amount of reading each day would be daunting. I showed him the six responses already turned in to convince him students had enough time to complete the task. He commented that all the students had been reading, though he didn't think of some of them as readers based on their past performance in his class. He thought the graphic novel made a big difference and engaged the students. He also said he walked around the room while they were responding and those with computers were actually writing. They weren't on the Internet. One student commented to him that she thought the book was funny.

The second day, Thursday, the physics students were in class and I gave them directions for the reading and first response while the students who had been present on Wednesday continued reading the second part of the story and writing their second responses. While they worked, I walked around the classroom checking with students who hadn't turned in their first responses yet. Some had left them at home or were still working on them. Once again, all the students were diligently working. Their teacher commented during the interview that this class generally did get right to work with assignments. He said students were surprised at how fast they could read the book.

Friday progressed much as the first two days. Before students began reading, I handed out directions for creating an optional comic of their own (see Appendix K for comics directions). Their teacher told them he would give bonus points to anyone who did this assignment. I also showed the students some graphic novels I brought into class for them to read if they finished their assignment early.

One student immediately began drawing a comic though I wasn't sure he'd completed his reading and his third written response. Still, I was pleased this assignment appealed to him. Some students finished the book and their third responses. A few took graphic novels from the cart to examine and some did homework from other classes.

In our interview after class, the teacher told me he'd walked out into the hallway where two girls from class had chosen to do their reading. One said to him sarcastically, "Great book." When questioned by the other student, she replied, "Well, it's a comic book." From this exchange, the teacher inferred that the first girl was disdainful of the graphic novel. This is not an uncommon response to graphic novels.

Monday, the fourth day of the study, was a two-hour class period due to state testing. During the first hour, students had time to complete the reading and their three responses. Students who were finished had the opportunity to read additional graphic novels which no one chose to do that day, or create a comic. Only two students were creating their own comic so far. If students weren't finishing *American Born Chinese* and their responses, they were doing homework for other classes. I walked around the room checking with students who still had responses to turn in.

During the second hour of the period we discussed the book. I had a video camera set up in the corner of the room to record the discussion. I was disappointed with how few students spoke, though the rest of them sat quietly and listened. The teacher was surprised by their lack of participation. He said they were usually livelier. I felt very ineffective in drawing them out. I wondered if they were inhibited by the camera or if it was because they didn't know me well enough. I was surprised to learn

from the discussion that very few of the students had ever read a graphic novel before and not many more read comics regularly. After the discussion I gave the students the survey and they had about fifteen minutes to complete it.

Class didn't meet on Tuesday, and Wednesday was another double period. During the first hour I presented the lesson on graphic novels. It included a PowerPoint presentation about the history of comics to show how graphic novels evolved from them, a Gene Yang web site about comics in the classroom, a handout about reading graphic novels, and another handout about comics terminology and comics conventions (see Appendices for lesson plan and handouts). We looked at examples of comics conventions that were used in *American Born Chinese*, and I briefly book talked the graphic novels I brought to class.

Once again I had a video camera set up in a corner of the classroom. The lesson was being recorded for my principal who was unable to observe me that day. This was my year for professional review and she needed to observe me teaching. I explained this to the students before I began the lesson.

I wasn't pleased with the lesson in that it was a lot of information to present at one time. If this hadn't been a study following a set protocol with strict time limitations, I would have divided up the lesson over a few days. While the students were quiet, no one interrupted or did other work during the lesson, but some students actually put their heads down on their desks part way through the hour. It was not my most effective teaching moment.

Both the teacher and the principal disagreed that it was a boring lesson, though. They both found it interesting and learned from it. However, they also both agreed with

me that it would have been better to provide the students this information in smaller portions over a longer period of time.

After the lesson I gave students directions to reread *American Born Chinese* and write their final responses (see Appendix O for final response prompts). They still had one hour left of class, but there was not much enthusiasm for rereading the book. Still, almost everyone was using their time to do so. I also received many responses from the first reading and surveys that hadn't yet been turned in.

Friday was the final day of the study. I brought cookies and Batman and Superman comics for the students. The cookies were popular, but only nine comics were taken. I also told the students they were welcome to keep their copy of *American Born Chinese* if they really liked it. About half of the students kept the book.

This last day was reserved for students to finish their responses to the second reading of the book and for the focus group interview. During the first half of the period I collected responses and asked seven students to participate in the interview. Five students agreed to the interview and we went to the library for the second half hour of class. Again, I videotaped for later transcription, and I also took notes during the interview.

Both the teacher and I were pleased that of the twenty-three students that participated in the study, seventeen had turned in all the assignments which included three written responses to the first reading of *American Born Chinese*, one written response to the second reading of the book, and the reading survey. All of the students turned in the reading surveys and at least three of the four written responses. Three students turned in extra credit comics they created.

Student Created Comics

As an optional assignment for extra credit, students were invited to create comics of their own (see Appendix K for creating comics directions). I didn't tell the students the purpose of this assignment, but I wanted to see if they incorporated any comics conventions in their work. They had access to *Comic Life* software (Freeverse Software) and I told them about online tools such as *Make Belief Comix* (http://www.makebeliefscomix.com) and *Comic Creator* (http://www.readwritethink.org/). Three students created comics, but all were hand drawn.

Two students began working on their comics in class the day I offered it as an option. One was Allen. Allen indicated on his survey that he didn't like to read and he'd never read a graphic novel before. He turned in a comic about prom night (see Appendix Q for Allen's comic). The other was Mark who participated in the focus group interview. Mark did like to read and indicated on his survey that he'd read manga, mainstream, and art graphic novels in the past. Mark's comic was a conversation between two people (see Appendix R for Mark's comic).

Allen's Comic

Allen's comic was black and white with six equally sized panels spaced two across and three down depicting scenes from prom night. Each panel was labeled: Grand March, Taking Pictures, Limo Ride, Dinner, Dance, and After Party. Allen did not try to impress with his artwork of stick figures, but rather he told a story with bit of humor.

In the first panel, we see a "cute couple" on parade with the boy saying, "I hope I don't trip." Allen made use of speech balloons and drew a door in the wall in the background to let the reader know that the march was taking place inside. The downward angle of the runway leads the reader's eye to the next panel in which the couple stands under trees while a parent takes far too many pictures. This is conveyed through the speech balloons of the boy declaring, "That's the 100th picture," and the mom saying, "OK one more!" The third panel shows the limo ride during the night which Allen indicates with the stars and moon in the sky. The next two panels show the prom goers at dinner and the dance. At dinner, one table of couples has their food and the other doesn't as indicated by the speech balloons, "This is so good!" and "There is no food here." At the dance, a young man is shown with his arms spread in the air shouting "Y!" while the deejay says, "YMCA!" The reader thinks the boy is shouting because the letter Y in the speech balloon is large and dark. The final panel shows three people in a hot tub out under the stars. We know it's a hot tub because one person is saying, "HOT!"

All of Allen's panels are like mini splash panels setting scenes. Each panel could have been enlarged. With additional panels of various sizes showing different perspectives including close-ups, each of Allen's individual panels could have been developed into a story of its own. The addition of musical notes in the deejay's balloon would have indicated he was singing, but Allen didn't include them. Allen did use panels, speech balloons, one with large, bolded text to indicate sound, and abbreviated narration at the bottom of each panel, all of which showed he had some understanding of comics conventions.

Mark's Comic

Mark's comic entitled "Stick Figure Mans! Best Comic Ever!!" is a conversation between two people on a somewhat metaphysical level. The fifteen comic panels are almost equally sized, spaced three across and five down, with alternating colored backgrounds. In the first panel we see Fred look up, and in the second panel a girl asks him "Whatcha looking at Fred?" In the third panel, Fred replies, "Our title," and the girl gasps. Mark's experience with comics is apparent in these first three panels because he flouts the fiction of the comic itself by having his character be self-aware, aware that he is a comic character in a comic. That this should never be done, though comic creators do it frequently, is shown when the girl gasps.

Mark also shows his knowledge of comics with his title. Creating the title "Best Comic Ever!!" mimics traditional comic covers that employ superlatives to attract readers. The title is even accented with a colored zigzag design outline.

Another indication of Mark's familiarity with comics is the credits at the bottom of the page. Many traditional comics are created by teams of people. This comic is "Written and illustrated by:" one person and "Colored by:" another.

While each panel is usually a stick figure or two in conversation and there is little use of perspective, Mark does use speech balloons, one with large bolded letters to indicate the volume of a scream, and thought balloons. The thought balloons are not outlined as is typically the case with speech balloons, but the difference between the two kinds of balloons would cause the reader to infer that the words in them are not spoken.

Mark also makes use of sound effects. When the girl has an epiphany in the tenth panel, she is hit with a flying logic book in the eleventh panel. We see the sound effect "fwoosh" and lines indicating the trajectory of the book. Sound effects are often made up words that imitate the sound, and motion is shown by lines indicating the direction of the movement.

Another example of Mark's use of comics conventions is the drawing of the little characters in the bottom of the ninth panel saying, "No, Sparla!" Sometimes comic writers include characters that are not actually part of the comic to make commentary about what is happening, somewhat like an editorial.

It would have been interesting to interview Mark about his comic, but time didn't allow it. I was able to interview May who turned in her comic after the study ended (see Appendix S for May's comic).

May's Comic

May is a Hmong student who recently transferred to this high school from a northern suburb. She will be married this summer and has a baby due in August. She plans to stay at home until spring when she would like to continue her education. Her survey indicated that she liked to read and had read manga before. She checks them out from the library when she has time to read. She has a younger, sixteen year old sister who loves manga.

May's comic is entitled "Time" and begins with a little girl in pigtails writing on some paper. May describes her comic:

She's writing a paper and then she keeps her eye on the clock because

it's almost time for the bell to ring. Then her pencil breaks and then she

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rushes to sharpen her pencil. She still looks at the clock to make sure she still has enough time. Then she gets frustrated and starts scribbling on her paper. Then the bell rings and her teacher finally says that the paper is due tomorrow. That's when she's kind of clueless about the paper being due tomorrow.

I believed that May's comic was well drawn and exemplified many comics conventions. She used a variety of panel sizes and included various perspectives from close-ups to almost a splash panel. Because time was of the essence, the clock was an important feature of most panels. May explained that she sort of hid the clock in the first panel, and then inserted a small panel to show what time it actually was. In the second panel, the clock is bigger because it's supposed to look closer. May explained, "It's like I exaggerated. And, then here (as she pointed to the fourth panel), the clock is still big. She's keeping an eye on the clock." A close-up of the clock as it rings appears again in the sixth panel.

May includes many sound effects with "scribble scribble scribble," "tick tick," "CRACK!" and "RING!" While there isn't much dialogue, she does have one speech balloon and two thought bubbles. Motion lines appear in the fourth panel to indicate the little girl left her seat to go to the pencil sharpener and also in the fifth panel to show how furiously fast she's writing. Finally, May made use of emanata, iconic representations, with symbols such as "!" to express a feeling of panic and "!@#*" to express frustration.

I asked May where she got her ideas to use all these comics conventions and she replied, "Just from the paper that you gave us….I wanted to try that." However, May had also done some cartooning in an art class at her other high school.

Because May was absent the last day of the study, I wasn't able to recruit her for the focus interview. I asked her some of the same questions that I asked the other students during the group interview. She said that she had not been familiar with the term graphic novel before I introduced it, and though she read manga, she thought they were just foreign books. She thought the graphic novels I brought to class were somewhat similar, but they didn't read backwards.

She thought graphic novels were more popular with Asian people because that's who she saw reading them at her other school. She noted that there were more Asian students at her previous high school than in her current school, and they were reading manga. She believed students might not be reading graphic novels because they didn't know about them and that they chose more traditional text novels because of their familiarity. May liked graphic novels and thought they were interesting. When asked why, she replied,

> "Well, it's the pictures. They show a lot of emotion on the character's
>
> faces. I think it's better than reading a chapter book because when you
>
> read a chapter book, there's a lot of description, words, but there's not
>
> really an image for you to see."

When asked if she thought graphic novels should be included in the school curriculum May said she'd seen some that are. She thought that the inclusions of graphic novels would depend upon whether the story actually fit the curriculum. She

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thought humorous stories would entice students to read and that graphic novels read faster than traditional texts.

We concluded the interview with May commenting about the acceptance of graphic novels in general, considering whether the graphic novel would be a fad or if they were here to stay.

I think the kids that start reading graphic novels will continue to read them. But, the ones who've never heard of them or read one, I don't think that they'll ever read one. So, maybe it depends on if they've experienced reading one before.

The three cartoons were created by a student with no graphic novel experience, one with quite a bit of graphic novel experience, and one with only manga experience. The student with manga experience had done some cartooning in an art class. The students demonstrated varying degrees of knowledge about comics conventions.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the study which included data from the following: written responses to two readings of *American Born Chinese*, a classroom discussion, student reading survey, researcher's field notes, interviews with the cooperating teacher, focus group interview, and cartoons submitted by students. The next chapter will present a summary of the study and the results of the study with regard to the research questions.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a summary of the study and discussion of the results in relation to the research questions listed in Chapter 1. Implications for educational practice, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research are discussed in Chapter 6.

Summary of the Study

This study was conducted in an attempt to ascertain students' responses to a graphic novel, specifically an art graphic novel. Graphic novels have received increased attention in the professional literature and the media. However, the bulk of this attention focuses on traditional superhero graphic novels or manga which are solid fixtures of pop culture.

Graphic novels, fiction or nonfiction book-length stories in the comic format, combine art and text creating a new medium for literacy (Bucher & Manning, 2004). They are "multimodal ensembles" (Kress, 2008) that require more complex cognitive skills than reading text alone (Schwarz, 2002). Like genre literature, graphic novels have their own conventions. Methods of reading a book in comic format, as well as understanding of these conventions, contribute to readers' abilities to make meaning of the text.

Having evolved from comics, graphic novels have a short history, and little research has been conducted with them, especially with regard to their use in the classroom. No studies have examined reader response to an art graphic novel or if knowledge of the conventions of graphic novels affects that response.

This study explored the responses of a twelfth grade political science class to the art graphic novel *American Born Chinese* to determine if students' understanding of graphic novel conventions affected their responses. It sought to examine how they made meaning of a graphic novel and if they could recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format.

A qualitative study based on reader response theory was conducted. Data sources included student written responses to a first and second reading of the book, student surveys, a group discussion, a focus group interview, student generated comics, field notes, and interviews with the teacher. A discussion of the results is presented next.

<div align="center">Discussion of the Results</div>

Data collected from this study attempts to address five research questions. Each question is listed below with a discussion of relevant results from the various data sources.

<div align="center">*Research Question One*</div>

The first research question asked, "How do students respond to a graphic novel?" Of specific concern was how they responded to the art graphic novel *American Born Chinese*. The following section will discuss students' responses and will also discuss their experiences with graphic novels and their perception of its popularity as a format as it affects their responses.

Student Responses to American Born Chinese

Student responses to their first reading of the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* were similar to responses they might make to any traditional prose novel

assigned to them in an English class. Responses were classified as plot, opinion/evaluation, connections, questions, or responses to images. Only the category of images would be unique as responses to a novel.

That students provided responses similar to those researchers have recorded over many years of reader response studies is not surprising (Beach, 1993; Martin, 1992; Sipe, 2008; Squire, 1964). Even though they were responding to a graphic novel for perhaps the first time, all their previous classroom high school experience at this school had been responding to written text only novels.

There is little consistency in the labels researchers have used to designate response categories. A problem with letting categories emerge from the data is that it is difficult to generalize due to the difficulty of applying the same classification system to other books in other situations (Sipe, 2008). This problem is compounded when analyzing responses to graphic novels which incorporate the additional element of images. Some of the responses classified as image responses in this study could actually fit into a traditional category of engagement (Beach, 1993).

Level of engagement. Students were definitely emotionally engaged with the text as noted by their responses to images in the subcategory of stereotypes. The majority of the students liked both the story and the format. In addition to appreciating the shock value of the stereotyped images, students described the images as "descriptive pictures" that eliminated the need for descriptive language. They stated the images gave the most detail, and, in some cases, told the story in wordless panels. It was a unique reading experience for them, different from any other school reading they'd performed.

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Students also indicated that they liked the story or three interrelated stories of

American Born Chinese. Though they complained about the ending, no one wrote or

stated in the discussion or focus group interview that they did not like the book as a

whole. In the survey many wrote, "I liked the story," while others listed specific things

they liked about the story. They judged it "a good book." Good stories are available in

many formats other than printed text such as films, stage plays, books published

originally in digital form on the Internet, and graphic novels. When one considers a text

as "any communicative medium" (Moje, 2008) with print text no longer the center of

everyday communications, it becomes clear that the more students experience a variety

of texts both in and out of school, the more opportunities they have to develop

multiliteracies. Schools need to reflect the wide range of multimodal literacy practices

in which students engage.

This high level of engagement is consistent with findings of researchers who

discovered graphic novels had wide appeal (Annett, 2008; Cary, 2004; Cho, Choi, &

Krashen, 2005; Lamanno, 2007; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002; Seyfried, 2008).

However, it wasn't reflected in the circulation statistics of the school library because the

art graphic novels were not circulating, perhaps because students indicated they were

unfamiliar with them prior to this study.

Retelling/interpretation responses. While 66 percent of the plot responses were

either retelling or interpreting the story, these responses may have been elicited and

shaped by the prompts for each section of the story. Because I was attempting to

determine if students could read images, could follow the plot when the images carried

the narrative, I provided prompts such as, "What is happening?" and referred to specific

pages. Students could read images and correctly related what was happening at certain points of the story. Because they understood what was happening, they could make reasonable predictions, and they were able to connect the three stories to arrive at a unified theme.

This suggests that students' understanding of the storyline may have been assisted by the use of images that provided cues for the story development (Christensen, 2006; Simmons, 2003). It may also be the case that the kinds of instruction or questions asked by teachers serve to focus students' responses on retelling or interpretation responses. In a study of children's responses to picture books of Patricia Polacco and Gerald McDermott in which responses were categorized as descriptive, interpretive, or thematic, it was concluded that the responses were a result of the classroom approach to the books (Madura, 1998, as cited in Arizipe and Styles, 2008).

Like the plot responses, responses categorized as opinion/evaluation, connections (intertextual and personal), and questions were based on the story, even though much of the story was told through pictures. Students also wrote responses about foreshadowing and denouement and brought these up in the discussion. These are similar to traditional responses students often make with prose novels and confirms what Versaci (2001, 2007) found about students' ability to study standardized literary devices when he taught comics and graphic novels in his college courses. Because students in this study were familiar with responding to traditional text novels in this manner, they responded to the graphic novel in the same way. This would indicate that students have similar responses to literature regardless of the format. Art graphic

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novels, sometimes referred to as literary graphic novels, have the potential to help students achieve both print and visual literacy.

Responses to images. Students also wrote comments about the images in the graphic novel and this would be uncommon as response to a text novel. A little more than one quarter of the written responses to the first reading of *American Born Chinese* consisted of responses to images. Again, these responses to images were shaped by the response prompts in an attempt to elicit responses to the format rather than the content of the novel. However, while several response prompts queried students about the images, many responses categorized as images responses were unsolicited. This may reflect the ability of images to evoke responses because images are often more powerful than words alone.

Each mode of the comic format, print and visual, has its own separate affordances. Kress (2008) questions if any mode can do what can be done with another mode. "Meaning is made in many modes and made differently in each of the modes used. Each affords its users the benefit of representing specific things aptly "(p. 99). With graphic novels, there is the distinctiveness of each mode as well as the complementarities of the modes when they are combined.

It is important to remember that in a graphic novel, words and images work together to create a new medium of communication that allows the affordances of both modes. In this study, a response was classified as an images response if it referred directly to an image or if it was a response triggered by an image. Sipe (2008) points out the difficulty of determining if a response is to words or to images:

Since readers are continuously shifting back and forth between words and pictures, children's visual meaning making may be frequently in tandem or integrated with their interpretation of the verbal text. Thus, it may be difficult to ascertain whether any particular comment or response is the result of their interpretations of the words or the pictures, since even quite young children have been shown to be capable of engaging in the dynamic process of "translating" from one sign system to another (p. 383).

Students may not have been aware that their comments were responses to images as they became accustomed to the images providing much of the narration. Many of these images were responses about setting, plot, or characters. There was not an images subcategory for responses to character like there was for setting and plot. Beach (1993) doesn't include a response category for character in his listing of reader responses. In Beach's list, responses to characters would be absorbed in the engaging and constructing categories. In this study, responses to characters were classified in the facial expressions and stereotypes subcategories of images. That these two categories comprised 39% of the images responses would indicate students focus on and engage with characters in novels.

Critical responses to image stereotypes. What students appreciated most, as indicated by the number of responses, was how the images portrayed stereotypes of Chin-Kee, Wei-Chen, and American teenagers. In both the written responses and in the discussion, students noted that the stereotyping would not have been as effective had it been done in words rather than images. In commenting on the stereotypes, one student wrote, "The pictures are obviously exaggerated." Another student wrote, "I think the

use of the pictures is important in driving home the idea of stereotypes." During the

discussion the teacher offered, "I don't think he could have portrayed this stereotypical

Chinese person as well with just description," and the students agreed.

This focus on the stereotypes Yang portrayed would indicate students have

learned what politically correct responses to racism are in our society. Responses of

shock and disgust are not only what the author was trying to evoke, he knew he would

evoke them based on Iser's (1978) notion of the Implied Reader. The author positioned

students to respond with the exaggerated stereotypes. If the stereotypes had been more

subtle, the response may not have been as strong. The following two responses indicate

students have been acculturated in political correctness.

> How do I read these pictures? With disgust. I cannot think of a single
>
> person who I have seen or heard of acting that way – with no filter or
>
> regard for others' emotions.
>
> I do not know the last time I saw someone use pictures like this to depict a
>
> Chinese person. Maybe some people would laugh at it, but it is
>
> revolting….It is like the "art" that portrays a Jew as someone with a huge
>
> nose, and dark curly hair. Or a black man that is shown as someone with
>
> huge lips and a wide nose. It simply makes me angry that there are such
>
> stereotypes.

However, that some students were shocked at the stereotypes presented in

American Born Chinese might indicate they didn't fully appreciate the irony of a

negative Chinese American caricature drawn by a Chinese American. Others seemed to

understand the author's intent was to amuse and cause them to think critically about

their own attitudes toward and perceptions of Chinese American people. In referring to Chin-Kee, one student wrote, "I suspect that the author uses him as a tool to make the reader feel dumb that they might have originally seen Jin Wang just like the way they saw Chin-Kee." Another wrote, "I think the author is showing how we Americans portray the Chinese, by using the stereotypical form of an Asian."

Students liked the fact that the images conveyed the setting and that they didn't have to read long, descriptive passages about the setting or the characters. Much of the detail, especially details about characters' emotions, was depicted through the images as reflected by the responses to images classified as facial expressions. This confirms Eisner's (1975) contention that humans are drawn to each other's faces more than any other part of the anatomy.

Students also expressed pleasure with the novelty of reading a book which they viewed as resembling a comic book. One student wrote in a written response to the third section of the book, "I never really read a comic book so that in and of itself is pretty interesting." This reflects the general appeal of books in comics format and accounts for their ability to motivate and engage students (Goldsmith, 2005; Gorman, 2003; Krashen, 2004; Lyga & Lyga, 2004; Serchey, 2008).

Arizpe and Styles (2008) report similarities in findings and conclusions in research about multimodal texts: reader/viewers engage with and find much satisfaction and pleasure in multimodal texts. It has been documented that youths' preferred texts are often multimodal (Moje, 2008). The ability of students to read different modes simultaneously is a sociocultural practice not defined as standard in school literacy and offers some students more opportunities for success (Siegel, 2006).

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On the survey students indicated that they liked the comic format of art and text. Students also appreciated the fast pace at which they could read a graphic novel, as well as how much information they gleaned from the images. They commented frequently about how important it was to examine the images for details. Wolf (2008) reports that a key principle of visual learning is the ability of images to communicate meaning and deepen our sense of the symbolic. Students need to develop and use their understanding of "how images affect a viewer, how images relate to one another, how images relate to words" (Bomer, 2008). Students believed that the images and text worked well together to tell the story. They appreciated how Yang created a multimodal ensemble, a combination of words and visuals, which conveyed meaning uniquely in a way that the individual modes could not have done separately.

Lack of thematic connections. Students did not make connections between Yang's caricatures in the graphic novel and parody in literature though, as seniors in high school, one might surmise they would have encountered parody in the novels they read in English class. Perhaps because the one is an exaggeration through images and the other through words, the students didn't see the similarities, though they understood the concept.

While this study was conducted in a political science classroom, when asked during the discussion if they saw any connections between this book and what they'd studied in class, they connected it to their study of immigration and didn't extend it to work in other classes. The focus on immigration may have caused students to attend to issues of racism and identity which may have influenced their responses to the stereotypes presented in the book.

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It was also the case the neither the teacher nor I fostered connections between the text and larger thematic issues due to time limitations and lack of familiarity with content of other courses. Sipe (2008) indicates that children benefit from talking with each as well as having adult assistance during discussions. However, no attempt was made by the teacher or me to aid students in making further connections with content of other courses. To have broadened connections to other courses might have helped students recognize the potential of integrating graphic novels into the curriculum.

Student Experiences with Graphic Novels

Few of the students in the study had ever heard of a graphic novel before, and even fewer had read one. During the discussion, only two students raised their hands when I asked if they'd ever read a graphic novel, and only a few more hands were raised when I asked if anyone read comics in the newspaper on a regular basis. The reading survey indicated that seven students read graphic novels prior to reading *American Born Chinese* in class.

This somewhat contradicts Annett's (2008) finding which indicated the students of the teachers he interviewed were familiar with the graphic novel format and "were able to speak about it with a surprising depth, often with more depth than the teachers themselves" (p. 169). One of the teachers he interviewed taught a university level elective graphic novel course and it might be that students registering for this course had a prior interest in, and thus familiarity with, graphic novels. Two other teachers reported that their students regularly read comic books and manga during personal reading time and brought them to class. However, Annett also reported that some of the

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teachers hadn't seen much outside reading of comics and graphic novels among their students.

It is interesting that this study and Annett's study took place in the same large metropolitan area. While few of the students in this study were familiar with graphic novels, more students of the teachers in Annett's study were familiar with them. As mentioned above, this might be accounted for by the fact that one of the teachers taught an elective graphic novel course and students enrolling in the course were probably already graphic novel readers. Three of the teachers taught graphic novels that were part of the school's Language Arts curriculum, so it's possible students had read graphic novels in previous classes or at least knew graphic novels were assigned in classes. Two teachers used graphic novels when they were given a choice of materials to use and they may have selected graphic novels because they were aware of their students' interest in them. That most students in this study were unfamiliar with graphic novels might indicate they don't associate very much with students who do read graphic novels.

Many students admitted they were not familiar with the concept of a graphic novel. Some students, placing emphasis on the word graphic, thought it meant a book with explicit sex and violence. When they learned that the concept referred to a book in comic book format, some of the comic book stigma surfaced in their responses. In their written responses, surveys, and comments made to their teacher and during the focus group interview, some expressed doubt and disdain about being asked to read a comic book. While many adolescents read and enjoy comics when they are young, they believe they outgrow them as they transition toward adulthood, viewing them as

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subliterate and juvenile (Versaci, 2001). The notion from the 1930s that comic books, and thus graphic novels, are a format for children, lingers. However, after reading the book, they were pleasantly surprised at how much they liked it.

Having had a positive experience with this graphic novel, students were eager to read more. In a final response to the second reading of the novel, one student wrote, "The experience of reading an 'art' graphic novel made me want to read another, my interest is piqued. I don't know if I'll prefer them to traditional novels but it will certainly be an interesting experience." It is important to remember that *American Born Chinese* won the Printz Award for quality young adult literature. Students might not experience as much pleasure with a different graphic novel.

Popularity of Graphic Novels

The professional literature indicates that graphic novels are very popular and rising in popularity almost explosively. Though it is a popular section of the library in the high school in which this study was conducted, it is popular with only a small percentage of students who check out the books on a regular basis. The types of graphic novels that circulate the most are manga and the traditional superhero variety.

That graphic novels are not popular with the general student population is reflected in the study students' lack of familiarity with graphic novels. Only about 30 percent of the students had read one before, though some admitted later that they knew they were available. They just did not know they were called graphic novels. Unaware of the existence of graphic novels and the stigma attached to what is perceived as reading comics might contribute to the lack of popularity of the graphic novel in this school.

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The unpopularity of art graphic novels of any genre, which tend to be more literary and are usually conceived of and published as a single volume, with the students in this study may reflect not only students' unfamiliarity with them, but also teachers' unfamiliarity with them. Annett (2008) reported that the teachers approached in his study simply didn't know much about graphic novels. He also felt they may be battling a distrust of graphic novels based on the stigma historically attached to comic books and their reputation as subliterature.

There are several possible reasons that teachers may not teach graphic novels. They may privilege print text over visual images and need to overcome a conscious or unconscious print bias, recognizing the increasing multimodality of all texts adolescents consume. They may prefer the tried and true canon of literature, rejecting anything that hints at popular culture such as graphic novels. It is therefore important, as Moje (2008) argues, that teachers should examine the kinds of texts and literacy practices that engage youth and expand the possibilities of youth to use a variety of texts both in and out of school. She further states that youth literacy, the practices and texts they engage in or with of their own volition, should be important to researchers simply because they are important to youth. As was noted earlier, young people prefer multimodal texts.

Educators need to broaden their understanding of literacy beyond print text. Developing multimodal literacy skills should not just be viewed as necessary to succeed in the workplace, but also to thrive, to experience the 21st century world fully. There is a need for teachers "to engage students in forms of literacy that have the potential to matter to them outside their lives in school" (Bomer, 2008, p. 357), and this would include graphic novels as well as other multimodal texts. Because popular culture is so

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influential on students, Bomer states that it is important to teach students productive and emancipatory ways of thinking about those texts. "These resources provide a strong foundation or framework for learning new materials, if teachers are skilled at making necessary connections" (p. 355).

Bringing art graphic novels into the classroom should not cause fear of co-opting students' out-of-school reading. Moje (2008) states that the danger of co-option is minimal because popular media and youths' literary practices are so fundamentally changed when they enter the classroom, youth fail to recognize them or own them. In addition, there doesn't appear to be any fandom associated with art graphic novels as there is with manga and traditional graphic novels. Based on the findings of this study, it would be difficult to pinpoint an art graphic novel audience among adolescents. Chandler-Olcott (2008) does mention that fandom with manga students tends to be invisible in school as part of a desire of students to keep their pursuits private and avoid ridicule of their fandom. This doesn't appear to be the case with art graphic novels in the school in which this study was conducted. However, that may not generalize to other schools.

The students interviewed indicated that they thought non-mainstream students read this type of literature. These would be Asian American students who read manga or another group of students they labeled "emo," a group that evolved from "goth" students. This was true of two students in the study who also chose to draw the optional comics: Amy was Asian American and Mark was "emo." These group associations could serve to stigmatize graphic novels and dissuade mainstream students from reading them. However, once mainstream students did read an art graphic novel, they liked it

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and wanted to read more of them. This might not translate to a desire to read manga or superhero graphic novels.

With the exception of one student, the students interviewed thought graphic novels would rise in popularity in their school. Based on the data collected in this study, it would seem that if the general population of students were aware of art graphic novels, if they had opportunities to experience them, they might like them as much as the students in the study. This is supported by a teen services librarian who chaired the "Get Graphic @ Your Library" pre-conference presented by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2002. He wrote that some thought graphic novels would be a passing fad. "And look at us now!....Graphic novels are definitely here to stay" (de Guzman, 2008, ¶ 6).

Research Question Two

The second research question asked, "How do students make meaning in a graphic novel?" This question was answered by examining their methods for reading a graphic novel which was addressed in their written responses, the discussion, and the reading survey.

The response strategies employed by students indicated the importance of the images, or visual literacy, something that would not have been important in a traditional text novel. The images provided details of the narrative that the text did not. Whether their reading procedure was to skim over the pictures first, then read the text, and then examine the pictures more closely, or read the text first, or look at the pictures first, students comprehended this novel. They followed the plots of the three stories, inferred how the narrative was carried by the images, understood how the stories combined at

the end, and could state a theme. The multiple ways students described their procedures for reading the text supports Eisner's (1996) claim that no one really knows for sure whether the words are read before or after viewing the pictures. It validates an approach Schmitt (1992) referred to as zigzagging.

Students recognized that their reading required a bit of multitasking and use of multimodal literacy skills, as the majority of them believed that it was the combination of text and image that helped them make the most sense of the story. In the multimodal ensemble of a graphic novel, they recognized that the text and images worked in combination with each other and created a new mode with affordances of both print and image. The integration of two modes with two separate literacies, required a new literacy, a multimodal literacy, for meaning making (Kress, 2008; Siegel, 2006). However, they felt it was necessary to know how to read images, particularly with regard to facial expressions.

While the students did understand the novel upon their first reading of it, the majority of them changed their reading method when rereading the book. Because their understanding of the format increased due to the discussion and lesson presented, they inspected the images more closely and noted some of the comics conventions. Arizpe and Style (2008) report research findings on multimodal texts point out a need for enough time to look closely at texts, to go back and forth between images, to reread. This also upholds McGarth's (2005) statement that graphic novels are virtually unskimmable.

Students could not identify anywhere else they might make use of their comic book reading skills other than reading comics or graphic novels. Based on research

about children's responses to picture books, Sipe (2008) states we know little about how their visual meaning making from one visual and verbal format relates to other visual and verbal formats whether it be film or digital Web-based texts, or comics that have high degrees of visual content. Wolf (2008) adds that "the more meaningful practice learners gain with multimodal materials, the more they dig deeper for meaning, compare facts across contexts, and see themselves as co-creators with authors and artists" (p. 490).

While students didn't see any transfer value in the multimodal skills they used when reading graphic novels, and though research about ways of integrating multimodal skills across many different types of texts needs more examination (Sipe, 2008), schools must prepare students to think critically with and about a variety of texts. There are enough similarities between film and comics in the use of panels and frames, the depiction of time lapsing, or the points of view and camera angles for students to see connections. Students might also be encouraged to consider the similarities between a comics panel and a computer screen to analyze them for content and design, thus recognizing the value of the multiliteracies required of each mode. "For students who no longer deal with pure word texts in their daily lives, multiple literacies are a necessity" (Schwarz, 2006, p. 63).

Research Questions Three and Four

Applying Knowledge of Graphic Novel Conventions

The third and fourth research questions sought to determine if students possess knowledge of the conventions of graphic novels and if knowledge of the conventions or lack thereof affected their responses. Readers with knowledge of text conventions may

respond differently to texts than those who are less knowledgeable as their knowledge of the conventions shapes their responses (Beach, 1993). Their responses to the first reading of the story would indicate that whether they knew comics conventions or not, it didn't impede their understanding. It was difficult to tell if students knew the conventions the author used during their first reading, but their responses to the second reading indicated that they were certainly more aware of these conventions during the second reading.

Response prompts to the first reading attempted to discover if students knew comics conventions by asking students to identify what was happening in certain panels and explain how they knew that this was happening. However, this didn't yield much information as the only conventions mentioned were blurring in the panels to indicate memory, clocks to indicate the passage of time, and sounds written as words.

It is therefore difficult to infer any conclusions from such little information. Without direct questioning about individual conventions, students could easily skip over anything they may not have understood and still have a basic understanding of the story. This happens frequently in prose novels. It's easy to skip uninteresting or complicated parts of the narrative and still understand the plot.

Based on the study of preschoolers' knowledge of comics conventions (Yannicopoulou, 2004, as cited in Arizpe & Styles, 2008), it is safe to assume students knew many comics conventions before reading *American Born Chinese*. Even if they weren't regular comics readers or graphic novel readers, some comics conventions such as speech balloons and speed lines are ubiquitous enough that one simply understands them from exposure to them in the media.

During the focus group interview, students indicated that they already knew how to read comics which would include comics conventions. Amanda stated it this way: "I think it's stuff you just pick up on when you're reading." Jason was confident he knew all he needed to know. "I read Garfield, so I knew how the format went to read it." Conventions are learned, whether informally through experience, or whether formally taught.

While some students may have known some comics conventions before reading *American Born Chinese,* most admitted that during their second reading, they gained more information. Some of this information gained involved comics conventions. These included both conventions of the text and the images: narration boxes, speech and thought balloons, text size, sound effects, panel size changes and splash panels, perspective, and even the order in which to read the panels both from panel to panel and within the panel. They cited the lesson about comics conventions and how to read comics as having made them more aware to look for the conventions. This supports the teaching of comics conventions which teachers in Annett's (2008) study advised. They used Scott McCloud's (1993) book *Understanding Comics* as well as some of the materials used in this study to teach concepts and vocabulary specific to graphic novels followed by asking students to identify conventions found in various graphic novels. It also confirms that comics literacy requires training and experience (Pustz, 1999). Because comics conventions refer to the visuals in graphic novels, teaching them improves visual literacy (Seppanen, 2006).

The influence of a second reading. The fact that the students were more aware of the conventions of graphic novels during their second reading aided them in that they

recognized the importance of the images and the details contained within those images.

Rereading enhances story comprehension and enjoyment (Faust & Glenzer, 2000).

Students indicated that by slowing down and examining the images, they understood the

story better, made connections between the three stories, and noticed details they missed

on their first reading. They attributed much of their additional knowledge gained to the

lesson taught in class and the discussion. The understanding of how text and image

work together to create the story, regardless of whether other conventions the author

used were noted, was the most important visual literacy skill students acquired, and it

did affect their responses.

As Eric noted about conventions in the focus interview, "I guess I just tried to be

more conscious of it…. It's like reading a book the first time and then having the

instructor go over it with you. You sort of understand everything. I guess it was just a

deeper level." This comment indicated the impact of the lesson and discussion. Arizpe

and Styles (2008) report that multimodal research concludes that talk and discussion

become scaffolding activities that help students have better comprehension of the texts.

The influence of instruction on conventions. With the lesson on conventions,

students were taught the vocabulary of comics which a student reflected on during the

focus group interview. In some cases, they learned the terminology for conventions

they already knew, terminology that was media-specific such as panels and gutters.

They now had the language to analyze and discuss a graphic novel, a language that was

specific to a more visual rather than verbal text. In responses to their second reading,

one student noted text as a visual depicting volume based on the size of the letters in a

speech balloon. Another noted that a balloon outlined in broken lines represented

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whispering. Arizpe and Styles (2008) state, "Providing or expanding the terms or metalanguage to discuss visual aspects is crucial to developing better understanding of the texts" (p. 369). They add that teachers must also be familiar with this language.

Construction of comics. The students who created their own comics used some comics conventions effectively, although that use varied according to their experience reading graphic novels and whether they created their comics before or after the lesson on comics conventions. Adam, the student with no experience, made use of a limited number of conventions and created his comic as soon as the optional assignment was given. Mark's use of comics conventions were of a sophisticated level; he created his comic before the lesson about comics conventions, so his knowledge truly was based on prior experience. May's use of comics conventions tended to be of a more technical nature. She had taken an art class on cartooning but also said that she deliberately tried some of the things she learned in the lesson about comics conventions.

Mark's comic supports the theory that readers already know comics conventions from experience, and May's comic indicates that it's helpful to teach comics conventions. May incorporated far more conventions than either of the other students, and she did this intentionally by looking at the Comics Terminology handout (see Appendix G). Whether students understood or were even consciously aware of comics conventions when they read the novel, they were still able to understand the book. However, in creating comics, it was evident from Mays' comic that knowledge of the conventions aided in creating a more interesting comic based on the language and grammar of sequential art (Bongco, 2000; Christiansen, 2000; Eisner, 1985;

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McCloud, 1993; Pustz, 1999). May not only understood visual literacy, she could communicate better visually.

Given that literacy is not just the ability to comprehend, it is also the ability to communicate, knowing comics conventions helped students discuss and draw comics. Because texts are becoming increasingly multimodal, students need to learn to read and compose in multiple media and modes and demonstrate their ability to communicate with people possessed of multiple intelligences (Bomer, 2008). Students who create their own comics feel a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment (Bitz, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002).

Research Question Five

Interpreting Thematic Issues

The fifth research question concerned students' abilities to interpret thematic issues when presented in comic book form. It was evident from their written responses, the group discussion, and the focus group interview that students identified the major theme of the novel as that of identity and self-acceptance. They also identified issues related to immigration by noting the clash of cultures, racism, and stereotyping.

Though some students admitted that initially they didn't take reading a novel in comic book form seriously, after reading the graphic novel, they were surprised at how much they enjoyed it, not only for the story itself, but for how effectively the author was able to communicate his message about certain themes using this format. Much like Versaci's (2001) students, they were awakened to the literary merit of the comic format. The content of *American Born Chinese* was not the focus of the study as much as the format of the book. Writing prompts, discussion questions, and interview questions

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concentrated more on student response to the format. Their responses to the themes or issues the author presented were not directly solicited.

When asked if graphic novels should be included in the school curriculum, the students interviewed in the focus group thought they should, but with qualifications. While they thought students might find them more engaging to read, and perhaps easier to read, they didn't feel graphic novels should be included in the curriculum unless they fit certain curriculum objectives. It could be concluded that in order to meet this "fitness" standard, the books would have to include the serious topics of a particular curriculum. Students expressed a reluctance to include them simply because they were something new.

Finding graphic novels engaging supports the research that graphic novels can be effectively used as motivational tools (Krashen, 2004). However, the comment in the focus group interview that graphic novels might be easier to read is contested by Chute (2008) and Schwarz (2002) who claim reading graphic novels requires a high degree of cognitive engagement and more complex cognitive skills. While visuals provide cues to reading comprehension, they also require their own form of literacy. The combination of print text and image in a graphic novel can be complicated.

Summary of Results in Respect to the Research Questions

In summary, students responded to an art graphic novel in many of the traditional ways students respond to text novels assigned in the classroom with the addition of responses about images. They responded to literary elements such as plot, theme, and characters, and noted foreshadowing and denouement. They asked questions

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and made both intertextual and personal connections. Responses were in reference to both text and images.

Students had little experience with graphic novels and were pleasantly surprised at how much they liked *American Born Chinese.* Confirming that graphic novels were not popular with the general student population, they believed they would gain in popularity as students became more familiar with them.

Students did not appear to have any difficulty reading a graphic novel. They used a variety of ways of reading, but all their methods included reading both text and pictures. After the discussion and lesson, students noted that on their second reading they gave closer attention to the images and noted more details.

It was not determined if they knew comics conventions before they began reading, but having this knowledge or not appeared to have little effect on their comprehension. However, after the discussion and lesson about comics conventions, students acquired terminology for comics conventions and were more aware of them during the second reading of the novel. They felt they changed their reading method and paid closer attention to the images, noticing more details. Knowledge of comics conventions did appear to have an effect on the number of conventions used when creating comics.

Finally, students were able to recognize serious issues when presented in comic book form. They felt graphic novels could be included in the school curriculum if subject matter matched.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND TEACHING

This chapter discusses implications for educational practice. It also presents

some limitations of the study. Finally, it offers suggestions for further research and

some final comments.

Implications for Educational Practice

Integrating Graphic Novels into the Curriculum

One result of this study verifies that students like art graphic novels. This

indicates that graphic novels could be popular provided students are aware of their

existence. While manga and traditional superhero graphic novels are part of pop

culture, art graphic novels are less so. Promoting them in the library and integrating

them into the classroom would increase student awareness.

Students responded to graphic novels in ways similar to responses they make to

prose texts. English teachers and librarians try to expose students to a variety of genres

to broaden their reading interests and skills. Film, drama and the Internet are widely

accepted texts in the classroom and library. Graphic novels, encompassing all types of

genres, can be introduced as another form of text, an alternate to traditional textbooks,

and used for similar purposes. Versaci (2007) demonstrated the capacity of graphic

novels for teaching literary elements, and other teachers have successfully integrated

them into the classroom for a variety of purposes (Carter, 2007).

Though initially students were skeptical about reading a novel in comic book

form, they recognized serious issues presented in this format. Student awareness of

graphic novels would be increased by including them in the school curriculum. And,

placing these novels into the curriculum would suggest teachers accept them as legitimate literature with the ability to address serious issues. Because the students find them engaging, including graphic novels in the curriculum might increase students' participation and learning. Spanning a variety of genres, it would not be difficult to find graphic novels to match many curricular areas. Suggestions for incorporating graphic novels in the curriculum are provided in several articles and books (Bucher & Manning, 2004); Carter, 2007; Cary, 2004; Christensen, 2006; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Gorman, 2003; Lyga & Lyga, 2004; Pawuk, 2007; Serchey, 2008).

Teaching Visual Literacy

Another result of this study demonstrated that students read graphic novels differently than they read printed or verbal text. While they used a variety of reading methods, all their ways of understanding the novel included examination of the images. This suggests the importance of teaching visual literacy skills. Some students paid scant attention to the images during their first reading, but recognized the importance of them after the discussion and lesson. Though they understood the novel during their first reading, they reported gaining new information on their second reading, mostly from close examination of the images.

Kress (2008) stresses the importance of images and argues that the visual elements of texts are becoming more complex. He also posits that the screen is replacing the book as the dominant medium of communication and that the dominance of writing has been replaced by the dominance of image. He believes this will eventually change the nature of writing on the page, for writing on the screen, its placement, shape, size, and color, as well as how it relates to the images, is multimodal.

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One can think of panels in comics and graphic novels as screens and thus see the value of using graphic novels as a vehicle for teaching visual literacy.

While traditional print text will still be available, it can't be denied that more and more communication is becoming digital, much of it incorporating images. Broadening educational literacy practices to include teaching visual literacy and other multimodal meaning-making systems beyond printed text is essential. Miller (2008) believes, "Students urgently need opportunities in schools to develop new literacies, performance knowledge, and multimodal learning strategies required for new times and social futures" (p. 451).

Teaching Comics Conventions

That students understood the novel during their first reading would indicate that students have some understanding of graphic novel or comics conventions from past experience. However, the lesson in comics conventions increased their visual literacy skills, and students changed their reading methods during their second reading. Because they were more aware of the importance of images in graphic novels, they gave them more attention and gleaned more information from them.

After the second reading, a student wrote that he now understood why the monkey reached for Wei-Chen, because he learned during the first reading that Wei-Chen was the Monkey King's son and actually a monkey. He couldn't understand why the monkey reached for Wei-Chen during the first reading because he didn't have this knowledge. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to guess the reason for the monkey's actions. But, the students did notice them on the first reading, though he didn't realize this scene was foreshadowing. It only caused some confusion. From

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learning the importance of images in a graphic novel, students will attend to them and perhaps recognize literary elements conveyed in them.

The lesson on conventions not only helped to improve students' visual literacy, they also learned terminology that caused them to note and appreciate the conventions. Because reading comics is a learned skill (Bennet, n.d.), and most students admitted they did not read comics regularly, teaching some of the comics conventions and visual literacy skills necessary to understand comics, will increase students' comprehension and appreciation of graphic novels.

While students didn't see any transfer value for knowing comics conventions other than for reading comics or graphic novels, the lesson taught in the study only minimally introduced comics conventions, and the examples used in the lesson were from *American Born Chinese*. Showing applications to other visual media such as the Internet or film would have made students more aware of the transfer value.

Teacher Education

This implies that teachers themselves need to possess multimodal literacies. Arizpe & Styles (2008) state, "With respect to classroom practice, it is clear that in order to carry out activities with multimodal texts, teachers need to be familiar with a wide range of them and have some knowledge of how they work and how they can be used with students" (p. 370). Training for pre-service teachers and in-service for veteran teachers need to focus on helping students become literate with a broad range of multimodal texts. This challenges what Siegel (2006) calls "verbocentric literacy curricula" (p. 72) and calls for a radical change to address the gap between print-based schooling and multimodal literacy practices.

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It calls for a change in educational policies as well. Literacy practices in schools seems to be shrinking to meet the limits of federal and state mandated testing which tends to focus on print literacy and linear thinking (Siegel, 2006). However, Miller (2008) believes is it essential to include multimodal texts beyond the printed word to ensure purposeful literacy for 21st century students. Bomer (2008) states that young children arrive at the schoolhouse door with the understanding that texts are multimodal because their lives are situated among images, music, movement, and other kinds of symbol systems. "If children enter school with a conception of text as multimodal, it is becoming increasingly apparent that people should also *depart* school….with a similar understanding" (p. 353).

Shifting from a monomodal literacy focus to one of multimodal literacy will require changes in what it means to be literate and what kinds of texts will be considered appropriate for literacy education. It frees teachers to move "beyond verbocentrism to multiple sign systems and transmediation" (Siegel, 2006), a translation of content across sign systems or modes of communication. To recognize that serious content can be presented in a variety of mediums, including graphic novels, allows for the study of particular mediums on their own terms.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations including the small sample size, the choice of just one graphic novel, the focus of the response prompts, the duration of the study, and the time of year the study was conducted.

Not only was this a small sample size, it was not representative of the school's population in age or ethnicity. While almost equally divided between male and female

students, the participants were all seniors. There was just one African American, one Asian American, two Latinos, and the rest were White. All of the students were native English speakers. A larger sample size including classes at all four high school grade levels and greater diversity would have been more representative of the school population.

The choice of *American Born Chinese* as the art graphic novel for the study was based on criteria for judging quality young adult literature. It may be representative of quality literature for young people and of art graphic novels, but the study reflects a unique experience with this one book that might not be repeated with other art graphic novels, or with graphic novels not considered to be "art" graphic novels. This suggests that it may be difficult to draw generalizations about students' responses to graphic novels overall from their responses to this one particular novel.

Responses to *American Born Chinese* in this study were shaped by the prompts: the written response prompts, the discussion questions, the reading questionnaire, and the focus group interview. They focused on the format of the book, the unique combination of words and images, rather than the content or plot. One written response prompt asked, "Look at pages 48-49. What do you think about the use of these pictures? How do you think the pictures are being used? How do you read these pictures?" One of the discussion questions was "How does Yang purposely create Chin-Kee as a stereotypical Chinese person?" The reading questionnaire asked, "How did you make sense of the book? What was more important; text, images, or a combination? Please explain." During the focus group interview, students responded to the question "How does knowing some comics conventions help when reading a

graphic novel?" Though students still addressed content of the book, the ratio of responses about traditional literary elements to responses about images might have been different. While the graphic novel format was the focus, the complexity of *American Born Chinese* certainly lends itself to responses of broader and greater depth than those elicited from this study.

The duration of the study limited the number of novels that could be read. Reading more art graphic novels in a variety of genres would have provided more generalizable results. This might have been more easily done if the study had been conducted in a language arts classroom rather than a social studies class. It is more typical to read several novels in language arts classes than in social studies classes. Providing somewhat similar prompts and applying the coding system used for *American Born Chinese* to other graphic novels would lend validity to the results and make them more generalizable.

The duration of the study also made it necessary to teach just one lesson about graphic novels and comics conventions. As discussed in Chapter 4, the one lesson was long and packed with information that might better have been presented in smaller segments throughout the study with more time given to look at examples of comics conventions in *American Born Chinese* and other graphic novels. Examples of how the visual literacy skills associated with comics conventions could be transferred to other visual media would have been possible if more time was allowed for the study.

There were two reasons that more time was not allowed for the study. The first reason was the restriction of the teacher who was gracious to allow the study to take place in his classroom. However, he had curriculum goals he had to meet, and though

this graphic novel tied in to his curriculum, conducting this study meant he had to forego other topics of study. The second reason the study was of short duration was that it began in the middle of May and there was little time left in the school year.

The middle of May is not an ideal time to conduct a study with senior students. The study might have provided a diversion for students ready to be done with high school, but many may have viewed their high school career as finished. This might be account partly for the heads on the desk during the lesson. The study was interrupted with an end of year physics field trip one day and with cap and gown distribution on the last day. The class did not meet on two days because of state testing and consequently class time was doubled on two other days. Conducting the study at a different time of the year without the end of year interruptions and modifications might have yielded different results.

Unique aspects of any study must be examined when generalizations are made. The limitations of the sample, the focus of the study, the duration of the study that prevented students from the opportunity to read and respond to a variety of art graphic novels, and the less than ideal time of year the study was conducted, will all have to be considered when determining the generalizability of these findings to other populations and settings.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study contributed to reader response research with regard to art graphic novels. Because there is so little empirical research with graphic novels, it suggests further research possibilities.

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First, this study could be replicated in a variety of ways. One way would be to use a more representative sample. Samples could include a broader age range using middle school and high school students and also include greater diversity in terms of population. This would provide a better prediction of generalizability.

Another way this study could be repeated would be with a variety of graphic novel texts. One could concentrate on art graphic novels or compare reader response to all three kinds of graphic novels: art, traditional, and manga.

Requiring students to create comics rather than suggesting it as an optional assignment would provide more data to determine if students could both understand and communicate in visual forms, a better assessment of their visual literacy. Based on the Comic Book Project (Bitz, 2004), students are motivated more with having the opportunity to create comics than to simply read them.

Conducting this study in a different context, perhaps in a school that already incorporated graphic novels in the curriculum, would yield different results. Students familiar with graphic novels would presumably respond differently than the students in this study, most of whom were unfamiliar with graphic novels and had little experience reading them.

A second suggestion for research would be to conduct a study of longer duration. This would allow the researcher to introduce a variety of graphic novels either all in one category or all three categories to explore reader response.

A study of longer duration would also allow additional lessons about comics conventions to be taught. Isolating the various conventions and examining their use in

graphic novels and how they might apply to other texts such as film or the Internet would increase students' visual literacy skills.

A third research possibility would be to compare reader response to graphic novels of any kind in book form to similar graphic novels on the Internet. Do students have a preference for one medium over another? Is there a difference in response between experienced graphic novel readers and non-graphic novel readers in their preferences? Do graphic novels seem less like comic books if they are presented digitally?

A fourth suggestion for future research might be to study the inclusion of a graphic novel in a language arts curriculum to examine the extent to which such inclusion might legitimatize graphic novels as appropriate or serious literature in the eyes of students. Some of the students in this study initially responded with skepticism to reading a graphic novel, something they perceived as a comic book with a comic book reputation, both as low quality literature and as literature for children. It would be interesting to conduct an attitude survey about graphic novels in a school prior to the inclusion of graphic novels in the curriculum and after.

To continue exploring the use of graphic novels in the curriculum, a survey of teachers could be conducted to find out if they are using them and how they are using them. If they are not using them, and Annett (2008) found few that were, what reasons are given for excluding them. Carter (2007) suggests exploring the basis of caution among educators about using graphic novels in the classroom.

Including graphic novels in the curriculum opens up further research possibilities. Many quality graphic novels have been created of classic literature.

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Though one student in the focus group interview expressed a fear that graphic novels would replace traditional texts, a study could be conducted comparing student response to a novel and the graphic novel version of the same. Research could also examine motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension. It could also determine if readers of the graphic novel version of the classic were able to address the same issues and themes as the readers of the classic itself.

A fifth research possibility exists in the school library. A survey of school librarians might ask some of the following questions: What percentage of the collection consists of graphic novels? How many of each kind of graphic novel is included in the collection? What are the graphic novel circulation statistics in comparison to other sections of the library or the library as a whole? Who checks out graphic novels? How do librarians promote graphic novels?

In determining who checks out graphic novels, though that is no guarantee that they read them, the adolescent audience for art graphic novels could be described. Research has identified an audience for traditional graphic novels and manga, but not the audience for art graphic novels. Examining the population that checks out the various kinds of graphic novels could confirm research about the audiences in a school library and identify the audience for art graphic novels.

Finally, research could be conducted with a graphic novel book club already established or established for the purposes of the study. Reader response data could be collected as well as information about the audience of readers.

Graphic novels are a relatively new medium requiring multimodal literacy skills. As such, they invite more research. Carter (2007) stresses a need for more research on

almost every aspect of using graphic novels for enhancing literacy. He believes that research is needed to show quantitative correlations between graphic novels and increased literacy.

Final Comments

This study was designed to investigate reader response to graphic novels and determine if knowledge of comics conventions affected that response. Reading a graphic novel was a new experience for the majority of participants in the study. This contradicted the impression of the general popularity of graphic novels purported by the professional literature and the media. However, once students read the graphic novel, they liked it. They had little to no difficulty understanding it. With the introduction of comics conventions, students learned to more closely examine the images and thus acquire new knowledge on a second reading of the book. This supports the benefits of teaching comics conventions.

Hatfield (2006) believes that we are novices in our studies in the field of comics, just learning how much we don't know. In using comics and graphic novels in the classroom, we are at the stage that the discipline of film studies was in the 1950s and 1960s (NCTE, 2005). It is hoped that this study makes a contribution to the scholarship in the field of comics and graphic novels as well as reader response.

It is also hoped that this study adds to the discussion of multimodal literacy and of graphic novels as multimodal texts. Our understanding of literacy is expanding to include the variety of multimodal texts and the need for competency in multimodal literacies to be successful in the workplace and everyday life. Including graphic novels in the curriculum, along with other multimodal texts, will help students to develop what

Siegel (2006) refers to as a "semiotic toolkit" to access the multitude of texts available,

to be fully literate in new times.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Hello. I am Heidi Hammond, your librarian at Henry Sibley High School. I am also a graduate student at the University of Minnesota working on my doctorate degree and I would like to conduct a study about students' responses to graphic novels with you in your classroom. I will describe what your participation will involve in order that you can decide on whether to grant consent or assent to participate in this study.

If you agree to participate, this is what I will ask you to do.
- Read the book *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang.
- Write three written responses of approximately one page each at designated intervals during the reading.
- Participate in a discussion about the book.
- Complete a reading survey about your reading interests, experiences reading graphic novels, and your responses to the book.
- Attend a lesson on the history of comic books and conventions of comic book writing.
- Read *American Born Chinese* a second time and write a final response.
- Possibly participate in a group interview.

It is estimated that the study will be completed during eight class periods with little or no time required of you outside of class.

Your teacher has determined that everyone will be required to do this as part of your class work since the graphic novel chosen fits nicely into your curriculum. However, it is voluntary for you to let me use any of your data in my study and whether you agree to volunteer for the study or not will not affect your grade in this class.

Please feel free to ask me any questions about the study now or you may visit me in the library any time to ask questions.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will need to sign an assent form if you are under 18 years of age and have your parent or guardian sign a consent form as well. If you are already 18, you will sign the consent form.

Any questions now?

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM
Graphic Novels and Multimodal Literacy: A Reader Response Study

You are invited to be in a research study of adolescent reader responses to a graphic novel, a novel written in comic book format. You were selected as a possible participant because you are in a high school political science course and have studied issues/themes contained in the book. You are asked to read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Heidi Hammond, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota.

The purpose of this study is to discover and describe high school students' written and oral responses to Gene Yang's 2007 Printz Award winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese* in a political science classroom setting. This study will also examine how students learn to comprehend a graphic novel based on the conventions used in the novel. The study will also determine if students recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format. The book discussion and group interview will be audio taped and transcribed and both the oral and written responses will be analyzed and an attempt will be made to organize those responses.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
- Read the book *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang.
- Write three written responses of approximately one page each at designated intervals during the reading.
- Participate in a discussion about the book.
- Complete a reading survey about your reading interests, experiences reading graphic novels, and your responses to the book.
- Attend a lesson on the history of comic books and conventions of comic book writing.
- Read *American Born Chinese* a second time and write a final response.
- Possibly participate in a group interview.

It is estimated that the study will be completed during eight class periods with little or no time required of you outside of class.

There are no risks to this study. The benefits to participation include the opportunity to read and discuss an award winning graphic novel in the company of peers, a teacher, and a librarian. You will also have the option of selecting a free comic book.

The records of the study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the

records. The audio tapes of the discussion and the interview will be erased no later than December 31, 2008.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota, Henry Sibley High School, Ms. Hammond, or your teacher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

The researcher conducting this study is Heidi Hammond. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to ask them during class or contact me in the IMC, (651) 681-2361, hammondh@isd197.k12.mn.us.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____   Date:

Signature of Investigator: _____   Date:

Appendix C

ASSENT FORM
Graphic Novels and Multimodal Literacy: A Reader Response Study

You are invited to be in a research study of adolescent reader responses to a graphic novel, a novel written in comic book format. You were selected as a possible participant because you are in a high school political science course and have studied issues/themes contained in the book. You are asked to read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Heidi Hammond, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota.

The purpose of this study is to discover and describe high school students' written and oral responses to Gene Yang's 2007 Printz Award winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese* in a political science classroom setting. This study will also examine how students learn to comprehend a graphic novel based on the conventions used in the novel. The study will also determine if students recognize serious issues when presented in comic book format. The book discussion and group interview will be audio taped and transcribed and both the oral and written responses will be analyzed and an attempt will be made to organize those responses.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
- Read the book *American Born Chinese* by Gene Yang.
- Write three written responses of approximately one page each at designated intervals during the reading.
- Participate in a discussion about the book.
- Complete a reading survey about your reading interests, experiences reading graphic novels, and your responses to the book.
- Attend a lesson on the history of comic books and conventions of comic book writing.
- Read *American Born Chinese* a second time and write a final response.
- Possibly participate in a group interview.

It is estimated that the study will be completed during eight class periods with little or no time required of you outside of class.

There are no risks to this study. The benefits to participation include the opportunity to read and discuss an award winning graphic novel in the company of peers, a teacher, and a librarian. You will also have the option of selecting a free comic book.

The records of the study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you as a participant. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the

records. The audio tapes of the discussion and the interview will be erased no later than December 31, 2008.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota, Henry Sibley High School, Ms. Hammond, or your teacher. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

The researcher conducting this study is Heidi Hammond. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to ask them during class or contact me in the IMC, (651) 681-2361, hammondh@isd197.k12.mn.us.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date:

Signature of parent or guardian: _____ Date:

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date:

Appendix D

A Short History of Comics in America

The Platinum Age

- 1895 - first newspaper strip
- 1933 – first true comic book of reprinted newspaper strips

The Golden Age

- 1938 – Superman's first appearance
- 1939 – Superman first hero to get his own comic book

Other superheroes followed Superman.

In the 1940s, comics were patriotic.

In the 1950s, romance, westerns, horror, crime, and science fiction comics were popular.

In 1952, Harvey Kurtzman and William Gaines pubished MAD as a comic book.
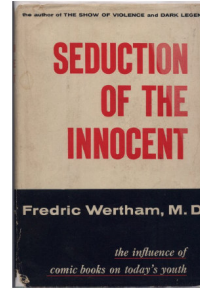
1954

Comic Code of Authority

Comic Magazine Association of America

CENSORED

•Profane language
•Extreme violence
•References to illegal substances
•Explicit or implied sexual content

MAD changed from comic to magazine format!

The Silver Age

The 1960s saw a revival of the superhero and a rivalry between DC Comics and Marvel Comics.

Underground Comix
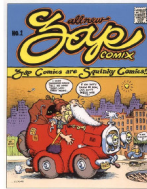
In 1968 Robert Crumb published the first Zap Comix.

The Graphic Novel

1978
Will Eisner
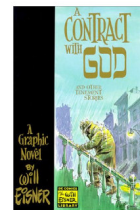
As they say, the rest is history.
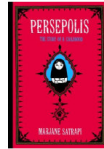
**SOME GRAPHIC NOVELS
MADE INTO MOVIES**

- 300
- Batman, Iron Man, Spiderman, Superman
- Hellboy
- Men in Black
- Persepolis
- Road to Perdition
- Sin City
- V for Vendetta

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Gene Yang

Graphic Novels in the Classroom

In this article, in what is one of the first-ever journal articles in graphic novel format, educator and graphic novel author Gene Yang makes a case for using graphic novels in classrooms.

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The precise definition of the term "graphic novel" is the subject of deep philosophical debates at comic book conventions everywhere.

That's not a graphic novel! It's a bunch of short stories!

Yeah, well, *that's* non-fiction!

Me, I define "graphic novel" as simply "thick comic book." I call any comic book thick enough to need a spine a graphic novel.

What?!

Are you daft?
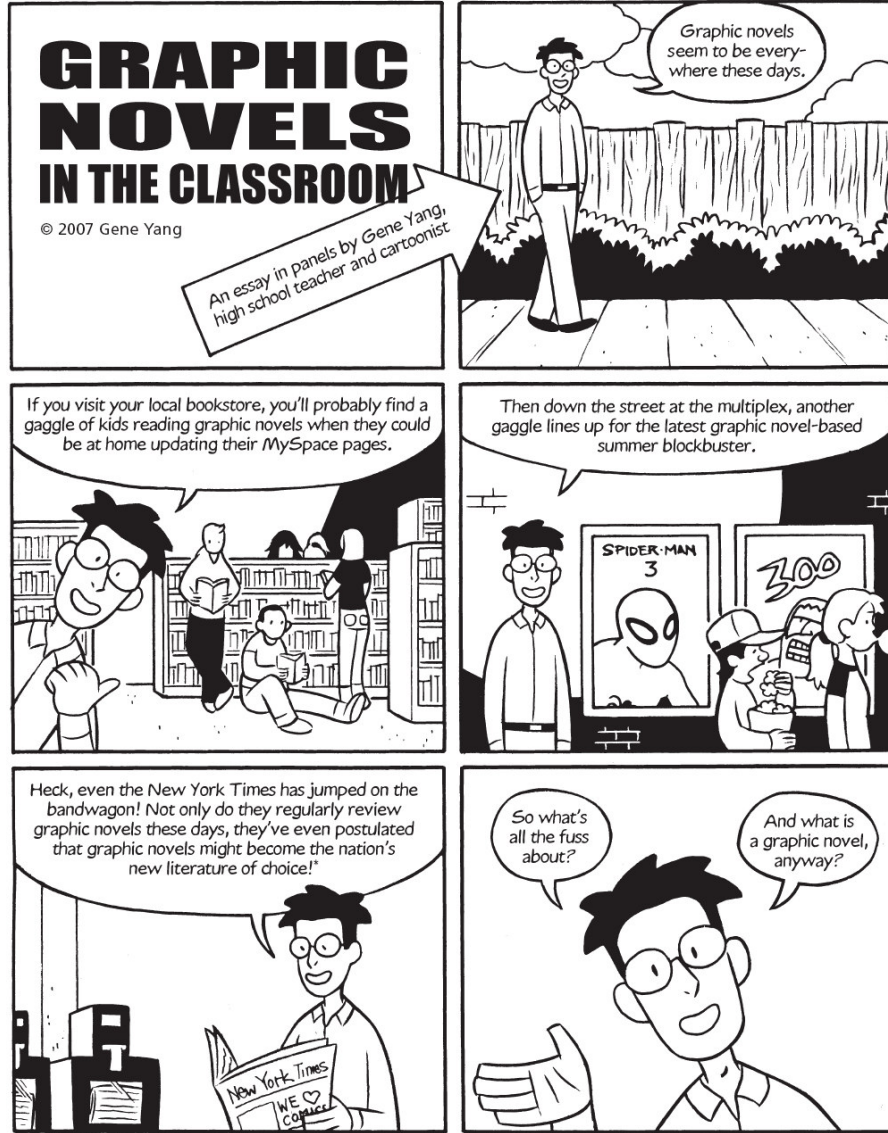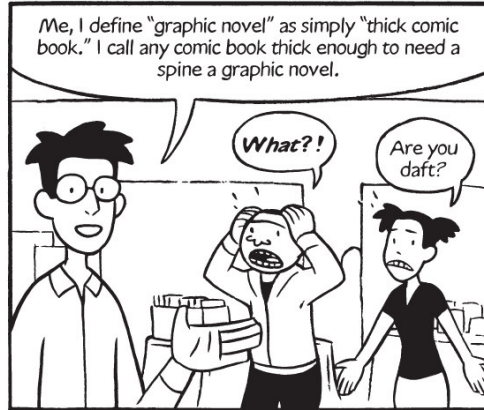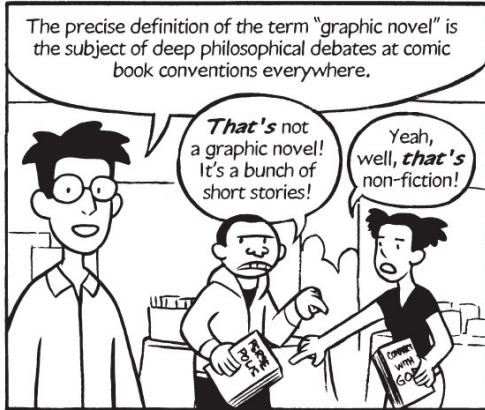
"Graphic novel" is really a political term. It's a part of a growing effort to cast the comics medium in a new, more literary light, apart from the genres usually associated with it.

They're in comics...

...and so are they.*
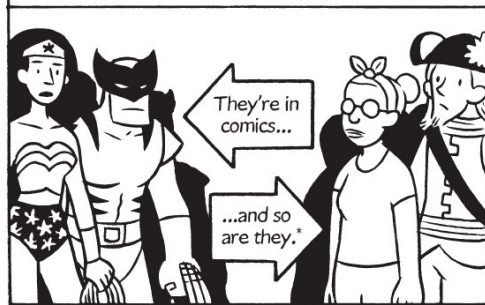
Over the past couple of decades, this effort has been pretty successful.

MAUS
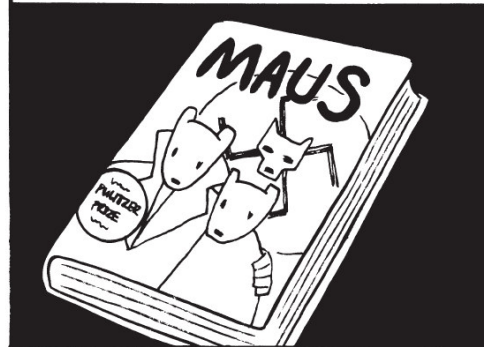
In fact, comic books - er, graphic novels – have been making their way into universities, book clubs, libraries...

...and even K-12 classrooms.

Not *my* classroom!

Tell me more!

Your mother's teacher

Not your mother's teacher

*That's Wonder Woman and Wolverine on the left, Lynda Barry and *Journey Into Mohawk Country*'s van den Bogaert on the right.

Spiegelman, A. (2003). *The complete Maus*. New York: Penguin.

*Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* is a great resource for this!

Second, in comparison to other visual media like film and animation, graphic novels are *permanent*.

Hey! I've been around since the 1880s!

Why I oughta-!

Film

Anim-ation

Now, my use of the word "permanent" needs some explanation. You see, language and actions in film and animation are time-bound. They're on screen one minute, and gone the next.

Oh.

That's what you mean.

Graphic novels, on the other hand, have a "visual permanence" to them. Time progresses only as quickly as your eyes move across the page. Let me show you what I mean.

I'm going to give the same lecture twice, first as fast as I can...

...and then as slow as I can.

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence...

"...intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer."

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence...

"...intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer."

See? It doesn't matter how quickly I "say" the lecture. What matters is how fast you choose to read it! The rate of information-transfer is firmly in your control!

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Well, here are some great, classroom-appropriate graphic novels that you ought to check out...

Bibliographic information is provided in the order books are shown: O'Connor, G. (2006). *Journey into Mohawk country*. New York: First Second Books. • Guibert, E. (2006). *Sardine in outer space* (J. Sfar, Illus.). New York: First Second Books. • Trondheim, L. (2007). *Tiny tyrant* (F. Parme, Illus.). New York: First Second Books. • Faller, R. (2006). *The adventures of Polo*. New York: Roaring Book. • Runton, A. (2004). *Owly: The way home & the bittersweet summer* (vol. 1). Marietta, GA: Top Shelf. • Smith, J. (2005). *Bone: Out from Boneville*. New York: Scholastic/Graphix. • Renier, A. (2005). *Spiral-bound*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf. • Siegel, S. C., & Siegel, M. (2006). *To dance: A ballerina's graphic novel*. New York: Atheneum/Richard Jackson. • Crane, J. (2005). *The clouds above*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.

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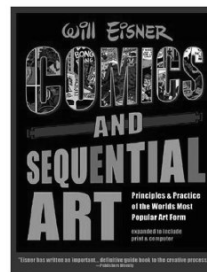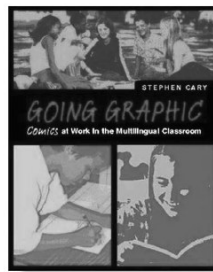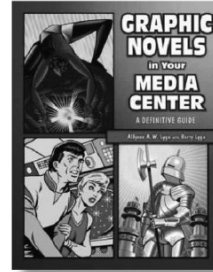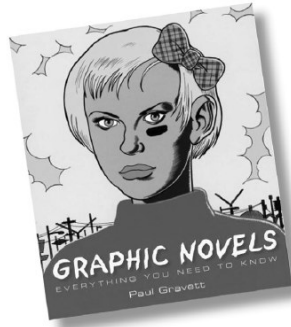
Bibliographic information is provided in the order books are shown: Gravett, P. (2005). *Graphic novels: Everything you need to know*. New York: Collins Design. • Lyga, A., & Lyga, B. (2004). *Graphic novels in your media center: A definitive guide*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited. • Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. • McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Paperbacks. • Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and sequential art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse.

Comics in the Classroom.net

National Association of Comics Art Educators

NACAE
www.teachingcomics.org

:01
First Second
www.firstsecondbooks.com

...and here are some great online resources!

KIDS LOVE COMICS!
www.kidslovecomics.com

the original
no flying no tights
for teens
www.noflyingnotights.com

BOOKSHELF
http://bookshelf.diamondcomics.com/public

Really, this is just the beginning! Imaginative, effective methods of teaching with graphic novels are just waiting to be discovered...

...by imaginative, effective teachers like YOU.

Gene Yang teaches computer science at a high school in Oakland, California. He has written and published comic books and graphic novels since 1996. His most recent graphic novel, *American Born Chinese,* won the 2007 American Library Association's Printz Award.

Appendix F

Not a lot of vitamins in this kind, but you get a taste for it.

TASTE MY WRATH! OCTO-RAY!!

OK, let's stop.

I'm done talking about it.

my favorite flavor!

delicious and nutricious!

...So they can sit on the shelf with your other books.

But don't worry...

The great thing about comics is, you can get an idea of their content just by flipping them open!

Comics is like that. It's a container for ideas.

Heroic Science Fiction

mmm...

Literary Fiction

Hardcover or softcover, graphic novels have enough pages to need a square spine...

The term is also sometimes used to imply adult-level content — i.e. comics are kids' stuff, but graphic novels are for adults. But then sometimes they call long kids' comics graphic novels, too.

You think you're funny, huh?

hee hee!

I'll deal with you later.

Wait a minute, you may be saying, "what ABOUT those superheroes?"

Ahem.

OK. "Comics" is the name of a medium, like "film" or "painting."

You don't think "film" means movies about gangsters, or cowboys, do you? Film is a way to express ideas. Any ideas you want to express.

But "novel" is used less precisely. The term "graphic novel" is often applied to short-story collections as well. I don't know why.

I think "novel" is just used to mean "long book."

OK, so what is a "graphic novel," besides a comic book?

Well, "graphic" means "told in images," not "naughty pictures."...

by Jessica Abel

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Comics Terminology

Splash panel. Also, splash page (if full page)

Bleed (image runs off page) Also, full bleed, image runs off page on all sides.

Speech balloon/ bubble

Page

"Camera" angles shot-reverse shot close up long shot

Panel/ frame

Gutter (space between panels)

Narrative box/ voice-over

Emanata

Borderless panel

Thought balloon/bubble

Other terms

Spread: two facing pages in a printed book
Recto/verso: technical terms for pages in a spread. Recto = right page, verso = left page
Printer's spread: the layout of pages for printing. Not the same as a spread in a printed book.
Thumbnail: a rough sketch of a comic, delineating placement of figures, word balloons, and background elements, as well as content of word balloons.
Pencil: a relatively defined drawing preliminary to the final inked stage.
Inks: the final stage of a comics drawing (applying ink to the pencil guidelines)
Mockup: a rough layout of pages to plan a book
Paste-up: the final artwork pages ready for printing
Indicia: important copyright and other legal information printed in a book, usually at the beginning.

Appendix H

FREE Online Comic Books
http://www.lorencollins.net/freecomic/

**Publishers such as DC, Marvel,
Dark Horse, and more!**

**Complete comic books
you can read online,
Free!**

Study Lesson Plans

Day 1 – Wednesday, May 14
1. Thank students for their participation.
2. Review procedures of study.
3. Introduce *American Born Chinese* by explaining the Printz Award and showing some examples of award winners; tell that the book has three story lines: the Monkey King, Jin Wang, and Danny.
4. Distribute the book and post-it notes for names in books plus graphic novel bookmark.
5. Distribute directions for reading and explain that the expectation is that they will read the first section and respond that day and if they don't finish in class, they should complete the assignment for homework.
6. Tell students there are laptops for their use for their responses.
7. Return consent/assent form copies.
8. Ask if there are any questions.
9. Provide the rest of the period for reading and responding.
10. Collect responses from those who are finished.

Day 2 – Thursday, May 15
1. Repeat directions from Day 1 for students who were at Valley Fair for Physics.
2. Read directions for the second response.
3. Allow time to read and respond.
4. Collect responses from those who are finished.

Day 3 – Friday, May 16
1. Catch up those who were absent.
2. Read directions for the third response.
3. Allow time to read and respond.
4. Collect responses from those who are finished.
5. Provide directions for creating comics of their own if they have finished the assignment.
6. Provide art graphic novels for students to read as an alternative to creating their own comic if they have finished their work.

Days 4, 5 – Monday, May 19 (two hour period due to state testing)
1. This is a catch-up day so students can finish with all three responses – allow one period unless all students are finished.
2. Be sure all responses are completed and collected.
3. Begin discussion. (See discussion questions.)
4. Allow about 15 minutes for students to complete the questionnaire/survey.
5. Collect survey.

Days 6, 7 – Wednesday, May 21 (two hour period due to state testing)
1. Continue discussion, if needed.
2. Present lesson on history of comics, conventions of comics (how to read comics, examples of conventions), and art graphic novel book talks.
3. Give directions for second reading of novel and response.
4. Allow time to read and respond.
5. Ask students who haven't completed the survey to do so.

Day 8 – Friday, May 23
1. Students have time to finish reading and responding. Ask any students who don't finish responding to try to do so by the end of the day and turn response in. Provide email for them to send response to you, if needed.
2. Distribute free comics and treats. Thank students for their participation and ask them to email you if they would like to know results of study.
3. Invite 5-6 students to participate in focus group.
4. Conduct focus group interview.

Appendix J

Reading Directions

1. Preview the book. Examine the front and back cover, read everything, and look at the pictures. Read the introductory material on inside flap of cover. Flip through the pages of the book.

2. Read pp. 5-52. Please write at least a one page response. Explain what is happening on pages 27-29. What do you think this book is going to be about? What makes you think so? Look at pages 48-49. What do you think about the use of these pictures? How do you think the pictures are being used? How do you read these pictures? Additionally, you may also use the response prompts below to write your response.

3. Read pp. 53-130. Write your response. Look at pages 100-105. What is going on here? Explain how you know this. Again, please try to fill at least one page and remember you may also use the response prompts below.

4. Read pp. 131-233. Write your response. Look at page 214. What is happening here? How do you know this? Feel free to write about not only the section you just finished reading, but also the book as a whole.

Response Prompts

- What do you think this story is about?
- What did you think of the use of these particular pictures, this particular art style?
- How does the author present the settings of each story? (Not what is the setting, but how does the author let the reader know about the setting?)
- How does the author develop the characters? What do you know about the characters and how do you know this?
- Did anything in the text or artwork prompt strong emotional response?
- Discuss some of the ideas or themes the author is exploring.

Here are some thoughts you might complete:
A quote or picture I liked or reacted to strongly is...
This reminds me of...
I predict...
This panel is interesting/ challenging/ puzzling because...
I now understand why/how/what...
Some questions I have are...
I'm confused about...

Appendix K

Creating Comics

You may draw your own comic or use online tools such as *Make Beliefs Comix* (http://www.makebeliefscomix.com) or *Comic Creator* (http://www.readwritethink.org/).

Below are some suggestions for a comic. However, you are welcome to think of your own plot.

- Expand on the story on p. 230 or p. 233. Add three to six panels.

- Create a page of events the Monkey King may have had on his Journey to the West to complete his test of virtue (see p. 215).

- Think about something that happened to you this past week. Tell the story (a very short story) in comic form up to six panels.

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Appendix L

American Born Chinese
Discussion Questions

1. Do you have any comments, opinions, questions, reactions you'd like to discuss?

2. This book won the Printz Award given to a young adult book that best exemplifies literary excellence by YALSA of ALA. Do you think it deserved this honor?

3. How does Yang purposely create Chin-Kee as a stereotypical Chinese person?

4. The Chin-Kee story is presented as a sitcom. How does Yang achieve this?

5. The way Jin treated Wei-chen…do you see examples of that in school? At home?

6. Did you notice you never saw Danny's parents until the end of the story?

7. Of all the disciplines the Monkey King mastered, what would be the most useful to you?

8. If you could change yourself, what changes would you make?

9. Does Tze-Yo-Tzuh remind you of anyone? What is it about him that causes the resemblance?

10. What message is the author trying to convey on p. 90? How does he do this?

11. What does the last panel on p. 215 mean?

12. What other choices might Wei-chen have made on p. 220?

13. What do you think Jin was telling Wei-chen on p. 230?

14. Jin was able to change himself (p. 29). How did he forfeit his soul?

15. Did you notice foreshadowing in the story? Where?

16. How do you "read" the pictures?

17. What did you think of the artwork? Did it aid your comprehension? Distract you? Add to the story?

18. Formatting – conventions or art/lettering to notice:
- < > around dialogue
- laugh track, clap track
- narration vs. dialogue
- angles, perspectives, point of view (p. 88-89)
- bubbles (p. 91 and p. 97)
- Oliphant High School (p. 109)

Appendix M

Reading Questionnaire

1. Do you read for pleasure?   Yes   No

2. If no, please state some reasons.

    If yes, what kinds of reading do you like to do?

    newspapers   magazines   nonfiction books

    online (kinds of websites)

    novels (kinds of books) other

3. Have you ever read a graphic novel before?   Yes   No

    If yes, what kind: mainstream   manga   art

4. What did you like or not like about reading *American Born Chinese*?

5. How did you make sense of the book? What was more important: text, images, or a combination? Please explain.

6. Would you be interested in reading more graphic novels?   Yes   No

7. How do you read a graphic novel? Please explain your procedure.

8. What things do you need to know how to do in order to understand graphic novels?

Appendix N

STUDY LESSON PLAN

1. Who reads comics?
    Simpsons comic book guy overheads
    Average age of comic book reader 25-30
    FAQs about graphic novels article from HornBook

2. History of comics powerpoint

3. Gene Yang's Graphic Novels in the Classroom pdf.

4. Artbomb handout
    What is a graphic novel?
    How to read a comic

5. Comic terminology overhead

6. Examples of comic conventions from *American Born Chinese*

7. Graphic novels of interest: *Blankets, Maus, Persepolis, Age of Bronze, Ghost World, Castle Waiting, Plain Janes*

8. Bookmark of comics online
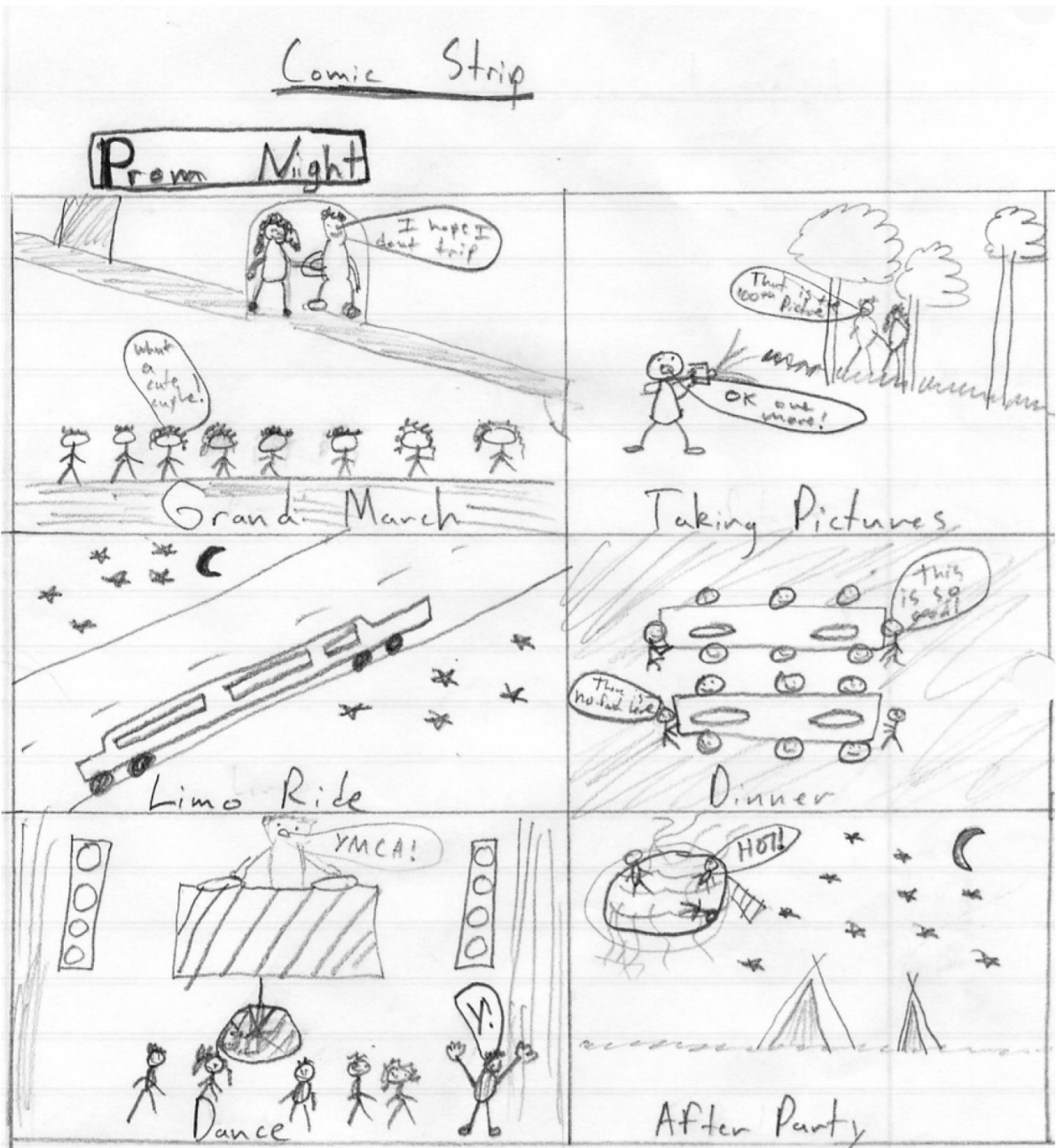
Appendix O

Final Response Prompts

- As you reread *American Born Chinese* did you change your method of reading the graphic novel? Please explain.

- Did you notice anything about the print text or images that you didn't notice during your first reading?

- Do you think there are any benefits to reading the book a second time?

Appendix P

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What did you know about graphic novels prior to participating in this study?

2. How popular do you think graphic novels are in this school or with people you know?

3. What do you think of graphic novels?

4. How does knowing some comics conventions help when reading a graphic novel?

5. Do you think knowing these conventions would be useful for anything other than reading graphic novels and comics?

6. Should graphic novels be included in the school curriculum?

7. Do you think graphic novels are here to stay?
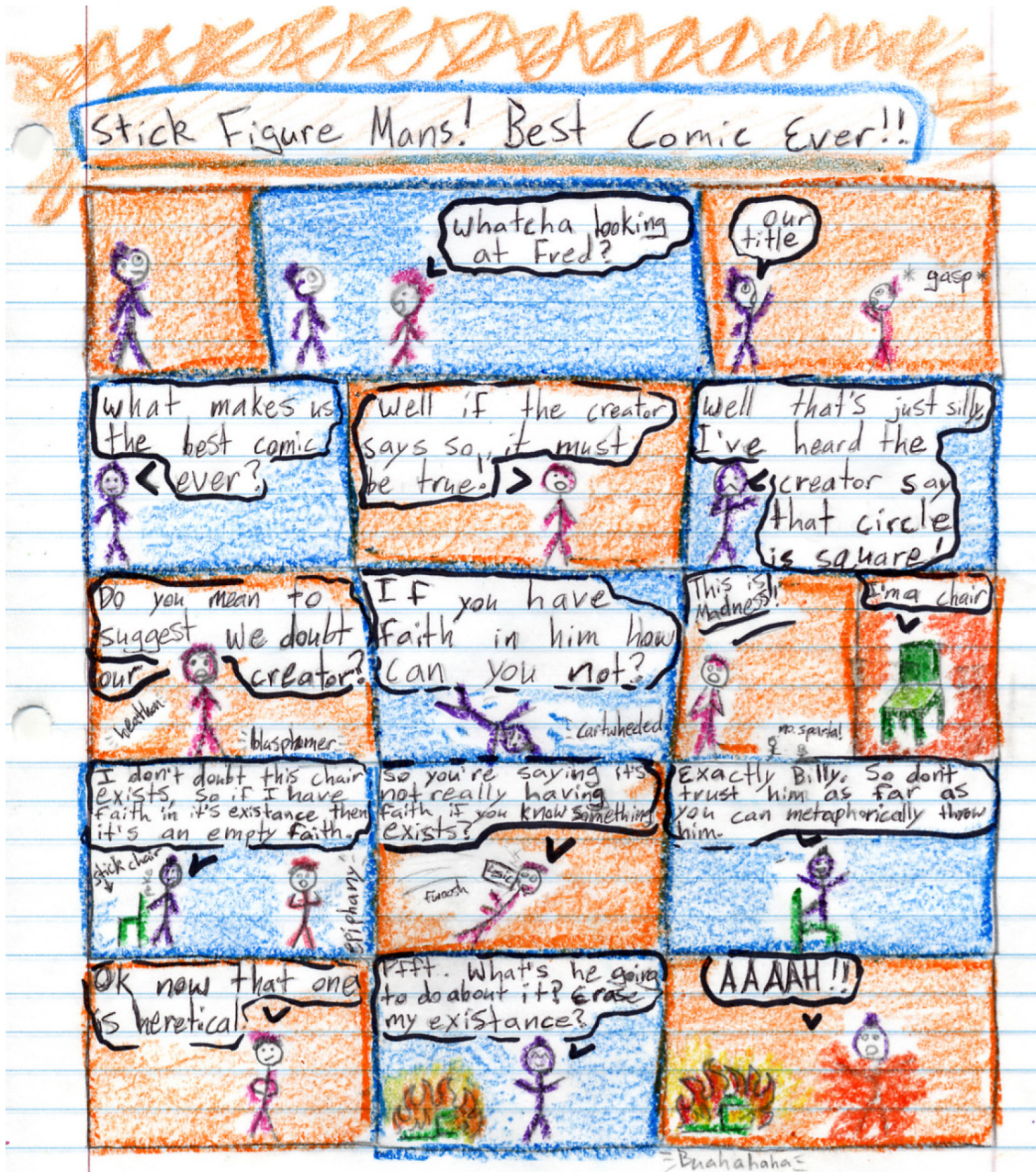
Appendix T

Graphic Novels

Arnoldi, K. (1998). *The amazing "true" story of a teenage single mom.* New York:

    Hyperion.

Castellucci, C. & Rugg, J. (2007). *The plain Janes.* New York: DC Comics.

Clowes, D. (1998). *Ghost world.* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.

Eisner, W. (1978). *A contract with God, and other tenement stories.* New York:

    Baronet Publishing.

Eisner, W. (1981). *New York: The big city.* New York: DC Comics.

Miller, F. (1986). *Batman: The dark knight returns.* New York: DC Comics.

Moore, A. (1986). *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics.

Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis: The story of a childhood.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Shanower, E. (2001). *Age of bronze: A thousand ships.* Orange, CA: Image Comics.

Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus: A survivor's tale.* New York: Pantheon.

Tan, S. (2007). *The arrival.* New York: Scholastic.

Thompson, C. (2003). *Blankets.* Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.

Winick, J. (2000). *Pedro and me: Friendship, loss, and what I learned.* New York:

    Henry Holt.

Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese.* New York: First Second.