The "Bane of the Bassinet"?

Graphic Novels as Informational Texts

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Patron drawing from a "Create Your Own Graphic Novel" activity. The template is available from Scholastic.com, but many different versions are available online for free or for a fee.

Originally, the authors were accepted to present this topic at the 2020 ALA Annual Conference as an Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) Hot Topic. As the conference was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, information from the presentation was adapted for this article.

A few weeks before schools across the United States closed due to COVID-19, the administration at a local New Orleans school posted Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines on the towel dispensers of bathrooms about how to wash your hands. What made these signs different from ones that kids had seen in the past? They were in a comic book format.

This nothing something new for the CDC, which published comic book versions of instructional material such as *The Junior Disease Detectives: Operation Outbreak* and *Preparedness 101: Zombie Pandemic* more than five years ago.[1]

Comics and graphic novels are being used in all areas of life, including medicine, law, and business, to teach adults. Since the first was held in London in 2010, there has been an annual worldwide conference on graphic medicine. In 2018, the American Bar Association published its first book in graphic novel format, *The Lean Law Firm: Run Your Firm Like the World's Most Efficient and Profitable Business.*[2] Business schools, including Harvard Business School, use case studies in comic book format. It is clear that comics and graphic novels are being used, both in and out of the classroom, as informational texts.

The popular format is also being used more frequently to teach children. There are many well-studied benefits to reading graphic novels. The format provides equal opportunities for readers, including English Language Learners (ELL) and those with learning differences; increases recall ability and memory formation; invites increased creativity and imagination; challenges traditional forms of prose and dialogue; and creates diverse learning opportunities.

Comics and graphic novels are multimodal texts, containing both text and images, that fulfill the diverse media and format standard of the Common Core Language Arts Standards. Literacy should no longer be defined as simply the mastery of linguistic written elements. The combination of words and pictures can provide new meanings.

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For example, picture a star. Now, imagine that star with the word "twinkle" written above it. Then, picture the star with the word "Hollywood" written above it. With the addition of words, the image takes on a new meaning.[3]

Similarly, in reading graphic novels, the reader creates the meaning based on the combination of visuals and text. Reading graphic novels "requires reading words in ways that do not follow the same top-to-bottom, left-to-right, heavy exposition format of traditional print texts. Reading graphic novels also entails deep comprehension of images and even empty space, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to combine text and graphical elements to infer what is not directly written in the text."[4]

In addition to these benefits, graphic novels and comic books also teach the essential skill of visual literacy, the ability to interpret information from a visual source such as an image, graph, or table.[5] As society uses technology more and more, it becomes essential for people to be able to interpret information presented in a visual format. Graphic novels teach this skill on a subconscious level as readers are inherently interpreting the images and filling in the blanks in the "gutters" between panels.

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Unfortunately, these are direct quotes that have been made by adults in libraries and at conferences. Perhaps these sentiments are left over from the tumultuous history of comic books which were, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, subject to book burnings and described by author John Mason Brown as "the marijuana of the nursery" and the "bane of the bassinet."[6]

However, in talking to those who shy away from graphic novels, it usually becomes clear that they are not familiar with the benefits of reading graphic novels or the variety of topics covered in graphic novel format. They are often surprised to learn that graphic novels can be used as informational texts for children in all subject areas.

How can libraries and librarians help alleviate these concerns and make sure that graphic novels are not just enjoyed by young readers but are also used as informational texts to educate? As librarians, we can promote them, demonstrate their benefits, make readers aware of them as informational resources, and incorporate them into programming. Just as there are graphic novels in almost every field for adults, there are graphic novels covering almost every subject and topic for children and teens. While many are familiar with their use in English language arts, few are aware of graphic novels addressing math, technology, science, and social studies.

Graphic novels are being used successfully in some classrooms to teach children, and they can be, similarly, used in

Centers for Disease Control signs posted in school bathrooms. Printable signs are available in Spanish as well.

libraries. Graphic novel collections are popular in most public libraries, so it is likely that teens and children would gladly participate in graphic novel book clubs and programming. Not only will they subconsciously be building visual literacy, reading comprehension, and vocabulary skills, but they will also be expanding their knowledge base.

For example, readers can learn about science from series such as Macmillan's Science Comics with titles about wild weather, the brain, rockets, and volcanoes, and Capstone Young Readers' Monster Science series provides factual information told by monster characters. Titles include *Frankenstein's Monster and Scientific Methods*, *Vampires and Cells*, and *Zombies and Electricity*. For programming, patrons could read the graphic novel or parts of the graphic novel and then conduct experiments based on the topic.

J. Appleseed Publishers' Graphic Prehistoric Animals series includes titles with facts about the animal, a graphic depiction of how the animal lived, and information about fossils of the animal. Another series that explores prehistoric times is Abby Howard's Earth Before Us, which includes *Dinosaur Empire!*, *Ocean Renegades!*, and *Mammal Takeover!* Programming ideas include using LEGO blocks to build a dinosaur or have a "dinosaur dig" ice block in which miniature dinosaurs, shells, or other "treasures" are frozen in a block of ice for kids to discover. By using colored salt, turkey basters, and cups, children learn about the properties of ice and water as well as what method works best to free the "fossils."

There are graphic novels that can be incorporated into activities in a library's makerspace. Image Comics' graphic novels *Howtoons* and *Howtoons [Re]Ignition* include do-it-yourself experiments and makerspace creations such as making a marshmallow shooter, kite, turkey baster flute, and even protective eye glasses to conduct the experiments. These are all introduced through characters and a plot about a brother and sister who are learning how to entertain themselves.

To encourage writing, DC Comics' *Dear Justice League* presents a series of stories about superheroes based on letters (mostly e-mails) that kids have written to Batman, Wonder Woman, Aquaman, and other members of the Justice League. After readers finish reading the graphic novel, they can write their own letter to a superhero.

Of course, the superhero does not have to be a member of the Justice League or a comic book hero—why not have readers write to a superhero in their own community? Readers will learn how to draft a letter with a salutation and closing as well as how to formulate questions for and comments about their hero. Another favorite graphic novel that encourages writing and journaling is *Cici's Journal: The Adventures of a Writer-in-Training,* which depicts several short stories about a girl who wants to be a great novelist. To do this, she studies the people around her and, in doing so, acts as a young detective, too. The graphic novel includes Cici's doodles, scrapbook photos, and journal entries as well as writing prompts.

Of course, there are also graphic novel biographies and Simon & Schuster's new Show Me History! series includes factual biographies of Amelia Earhart, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Alexander Hamilton. The publisher is regularly releasing new titles, with books on Muhammad Ali and Harriet Tubman available this winter. Not only will readers enjoy memoirs such as Cece Bell's *El Deafo* or Vera Brosgol's *Be Prepared*, but they will also learn factual information and build empathy and understanding for the situations and lives of others. Readers can be encouraged to then write and illustrate their own life story or a special moment in their life.

Creating graphic novels is a popular lesson-based activity in classrooms. Drawing, painting, and sculpting have been used as art therapy, and creating graphic novels is just another form. Authors of graphic novels have explained that their books not only help *the reader* feel empathy or work through problems, but they also help *the author* work through feelings.

Dean Trippe, author of the adult graphic novel *Something Terrible*, originally a webcomic, explained that "making my whole story into a comic has been just as freeing, it turns out, because now I feel like my life and what I learned while trapped by fear and shame can help others find their way out of that same darkness."[7]

Similarly, Jarrett Krosoczka, finalist for the National Book Award, said that drawing, especially in his teen sketchbooks, was therapeutic and helped him "to be able to work through some of this sort of darkness I had in my head."[8] He used these sketchbooks to create his award-winning graphic memoir *Hey Kiddo*, which deals with his mother's addiction and his being raised by his grandparents; the book is dedicated to "every reader who recognizes this experience."[9]

Students at a Title I school in Pennsylvania were tasked with reading Butzer's *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* and then writing or illustrating one of the character's point of view. One student chose a background character who had no dialogue or text about her in the graphic novel, but the student created an entire backstory and characterization. This demonstrates the power of multimodality—through physically seeing the image, the reader was able to empathize with a nameless character.[10] Having readers create their own graphic novels allows "increased critical thinking [that] comes into play when students are asked to create a comic book that does not just require them to regurgitate information about a story or time in history, but to reflect on the story."[11]

For historical graphic novels, prompts can include to tell a different ending, to portray the story from one actor's point of view or to think about how events would be different in modern times. For example, how would World War II be different if modern technology had existed? One pre-service teacher created a graphic novel prototype of *Romeo and Juliet* with much of the dialogue told through text messages.[12]

If there is not time for patrons to create their own graphic novels, they could be given pages of graphic novels with the text in the speech bubbles erased, or, these could be left as passive programming to be taken and completed. Readers use visual clues from the pictures to determine what the characters would say. This activity can later lead to skills in writing dialogue or playwriting and screenwriting. Author Gene Luen Yang has described his process of creating graphic novels akin to that of writing a script for a film.[13]

Of course, there is not a specific age range that is eligible for graphic novel activities in the library. Graphic novels are available that are appropriate for all age ranges and all reading levels. TOON Books features several graphic novels that can serve as informational texts for young and beginning readers. For science, young readers will enjoy TOON's Giggle and Learn series, including *Snails Are Just My Speed*, *A Goofy*

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Guide to Penguins, and *Ants Don't Wear Pants!,* which includes a surprising amount of factual information complete with diagrams. Young readers can then be encouraged to make their own comic about a favorite animal or insect.

Wordplay hilariously teaches about compound words as a little girl imagines what a "watchdog" or "moonlight" really looks like. After they read the book, young patrons can then draw their own interpretations of compound words that they know or from a provided list. For the parents and caregivers who want their child to get excited about math, TOON's *3x4* teaches about number sets. Patrons can then have their own fun with number sets using materials at the library or at home. The TOON website includes read-alouds, printable activities, and a digital Cartoon Maker.

All of these activities could be done in conjunction with National Free Comic Book Day (traditionally celebrated the first Saturday in May) and maybe even through a partnership between the library and a local comic book store. Why not sponsor a library Comic Con encouraging everyone to dress up and providing an outlet for members of the graphic novel club to present their comic book creations at a publishing
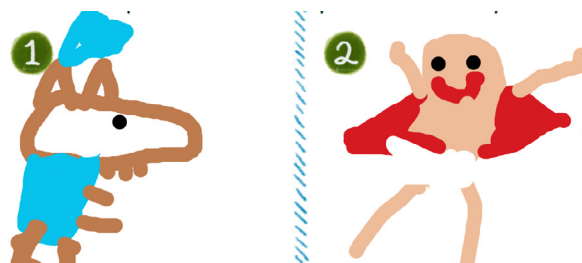
Second grade student drawing answering "What is a graphic novel?" submitted digitally during COVID-19 library programming in New Orleans.

party? These graphic novel programming ideas can also be easily adapted for virtual programs and activities, too.

Perhaps Wertham was on to something when he intimated that comic books were addictive. Graphic novels are popular with young readers, and there has been research showing increases in circulation with the introduction of graphic novels into the collection. There are so many ways to incorporate graphic novels into library programming. Children, parents, and teachers can all benefit from graphic novels when they are used as informational texts in our graphic world. **&**

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Graphic novels have been around for many years, but they're enjoying a heyday, especially with younger and often reluctant readers. Jonathan Todd teaches children how to create graphic novels in libraries in Massachusetts. In the Spring 2021 issue of *Children and Libraries,* he'll share how he tailored his workshops for virtual participation to enable libraries to continue offering his program during the pandemic. His new autobiographical comic strip for *CAL* is called *5 A.M.,* about life as a cartoonist and family man. His debut graphic novel, *Timid* (Scholastic/Graphix), will be published in 2022. **&**