Voices from the Field

Old Media, New Media: The Graphic Novel as Bildungsroman

Gretchen Schwarz & Christina Crenshaw
Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

*I frequent our town's chain book store when paper grading calls my name. Surrounded by books, I find evaluating a stack of freshman composition papers more enjoyable. Recently, I became distracted by a small cluster of absorbed tweens lounging near me. I was struck by the sight of three young ladies reading, each engrossed in a graphic novel held approximately six inches from her face. I wondered, were they also readers of classical coming of age novels like **Huckleberry Finn** or **Treasure Island**? Did they also read young adult novels? What other kinds of texts did they read? What did these young ladies find so appealing about graphic novels? All this pondering led me to this supposition: surely, there must be both personal and academic benefits to studying new forms of literary texts such as graphic novels.*

As this young college teacher discovered, graphic novels are "hot." They show up everywhere from book stores to TV shows. Educators, too, are discovering the possibilities for graphic novels across the curriculum. Library media specialists have long been advocates and now urge libraries to make graphic novels available for future teachers preparing for their careers (Downey 2009). Cary (2004) has declared the value of graphic novels in teaching English Language Learners. Christensen (2006) suggests that graphic novels have a place in social studies. The list goes on.

Among the possibilities, educators can explore the graphic novel as a bildungsroman, a coming of age story—an old genre in the literary canon appearing in a new medium. The graphic novel as bildungsroman can be used to teach media literacy/multiple literacies, while examining issues that can aid adolescent development and engage students with diversity. Along with

a brief history of the bildungsroman and the graphic novel as a bildungsroman, following is an examination of the potential for this medium and genre in media literacy education.

The New Bildungsroman: The Graphic Novel

Graphic novels are a growing topic in education. Schwartz and Rubenstein-Avila (2006) demonstrate that students (including reluctant readers in particular) may engage with literature more frequently when given graphic novels (Lyga and Lyga 2004). Using graphic novels as a part of the curriculum carries academic merit, enhancing the understanding of complex ideas and critical literacy (Fisher and Frey 2007), or improving ESL students' English reading skills (Chun 2009). There is, however, little literature underscoring the graphic novel as bildungsroman. The traditional print coming of age novel such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, or *Great Expectations*, or a contemporary novel like the *The Giver*, offers themes and plots centering on the development of a young person. Much of the already canonized young adult literature centers on a young protagonist and his or her journey to maturity. For many readers this journey acts as an impetus for examining their own lives.

The coming of age novel is often associated with the term "bildungsroman," a German term that means "formation novel" (Boes 2008). The term dates to 18th century Germany when writers such as Christoph Martin Weiland and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote novels centering on the personal development of a young protagonist and his or her learning process or "apprenticeship" (Boes 2008). Often the protagonist wanders in search of love, social justice, or the meaning of life, and on the journey to discovery he or she faces conflict with self, family, and society. The bildungsroman has become a flexible genre as reflected in the scholarly literature on colonial, feminist, comic, ironic,

and, of course, the anti-bildungsroman. The genre has grown to include women and minority writers and has "gone global." The list of example novels offered on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman) includes not only Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* but Voltaire's *Candide* and Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*.

A number of graphic novels may be included in the bildungsroman genre. In fact, in the history of the development of the graphic novel, autobiographical stories of coming of age play an important role from the "x-rated" underground "comix" of the 1960s to the "alternative comics" of the 1980s. (See Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* 2005, for discussion of autobiography in graphic novels.) Many graphic novelists describe their younger years, and in some stories, the protagonists move into new understandings and maturity. Even the titles indicate the genre like *Paul has a Summer Job* (2003) by Michel Rabagliati. What does the graphic novel bildungsroman have to offer?

Media Literacy/Multiple Literacies

A growing number of educators believe graphic novels can help teach media literacy or multiple literacies. The National Council of Teachers of English (2008) offers a position statement, stating that "the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies." Visual literacy, information literacy, network literacy and more are all "multiple literacies." As Tyner (1998) suggests, the term media literacy can serve as the umbrella term for all these literacies, and certainly, media literacy educators address them all. In particular, the graphic novel is a medium which lends itself well to teaching media/multiple literacies as Gillenwater (2009) suggests.

Hughes and King (2010), in one of the few articles addressing the coming of age graphic novel, discuss the complexity of several Canadian graphic novels, such as Rabagliati's *Paul Has a Summer Job*. They show that such books offer not only access to traditional literacy skills like literary terms and summarizing, but also new skills like comprehending how panels and gutters, for example, contribute to a graphic novel. Hughes and King (2010) note:

> Contrary to a trend to promote graphic novels as "simpler" texts for "struggling" readers, we argue that graphic novels require different and possibly even more complex reading skills than traditional print texts… the increasing availability of graphic novels provides adolescent readers with opportunities to engage with a medium that complements the literacies required by the kinds of multimedia platforms many of them are immersed in daily, such as MSN, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. (65-66)

Versaci (2007), in comparing graphic novels to other media like photography, film, and print literature, suggests that graphic novels are a sophisticated medium and operate "with a unique poetics" (13). He expands as follows (including graphic novels as "comics"):

> On the one hand, comics are read, as are literature and film, in a linear fashion… Part of comics' graphic language is the alteration of panel size and shape to influence, for various purposes, the pace of reading. But because these panels form page-length and sometimes multiple-page-length layouts, reading a comic is not always linear. That is, unlike film, which unspools at a more or less predetermined… pace, comics creators can play with the design of an entire page by manipulating the visuals within panels themselves within the page to create additional layers of meaning. (14-16)

What Eisner (1985) calls "sequential art" is a complex literacy, a literacy that graphic novelist McCloud (1993, 2000, 2006) continues to explore. Both educators and students have much to learn.

The influence of graphic novels extends beyond the medium itself. For several decades, it has been a Hollywood trend to turn graphic novels into films based on superheroes such as Batman and the X-Men. Hollywood has also turned non-superhero graphic novels into films, such as *V for Vendetta*, *American Splendor*, and *Road to Perdition*. Comparing and contrasting films and graphic novels is a media literacy activity which requires students to analyze how different media work and what the strengths and weaknesses of various media are for diverse purposes and audiences. Film versions of the graphic novels Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) and Clowes' *Ghost World* (2001) fall into the bildungsroman genre, and even clips can be used to compare media as well as to learn the "grammar" of films and graphic novels.

Adolescent Development, Diversity, and Graphic Novels

While teaching media literacy, the bildungsroman graphic novel may also include developmental tasks young people face, tasks outlined by Havighurst (1972), including:

- Achieving mature relations with age mates
- Achieving socially responsible behavior
- Achieving a set of values
- Achieving appropriate social roles

An example of a novel that recognizes the tasks of adolescent development is *The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (1998) by Katherine Arnoldi. The novel is not a warning against teen pregnancy but an account of a young woman who keeps her baby but also overcomes many adversities to go to college and create a life. In a simple black and white format, the narrator tells of her love of her baby daughter as well as her determination to "be a person becoming something…" She describes job difficulties, troubled relationships with men and family members, treating her traumas with humor as well as honesty. In the author's note at the beginning, Arnoldi declares her purpose to "help single moms feel worthy to pursue their rights to an equal access to education and provide them with information to do so, since young moms often miss out on high school guidance counseling." Arnoldi offers tips like the phone numbers for the National Coalition against Domestic Violence and ALANON and advises the use of the *Lovejoy Guide to Colleges*. Although she may have made mistakes, this young woman becomes, with sheer determination and courage, a socially responsible mother with her own values.

Wolk (2009) emphasizes the role of young adult literature, including graphic novels, in teaching students social responsibility in a democracy. Urging an inquiry approach to reading, Wolk observes, "As educators, we need to help students to see that inside these provocative books are stories that can help us to better understand ourselves, who we are and who we want to become" (672). Among the young adult books Wolk suggests for lessons that include drama and role-play, and research, are the bildungsroman graphic novels *Persepolis* and *American Born Chinese* (by Gene Yuen Lang). Graphic novels involve the reader emotionally, and Wolk declares, "Social responsibility must go far beyond citizenship; it is about shaping human beings with intellectual curiosity, a caring heart, and a belief in the common good" (665). Social responsibility is a task adolescents face growing up.

The journeys of "other" adolescents can engage students, too. Bernstein (2008) uses *Persepolis 2* (2005) with her college English students for "renegotiating students' agency and identity beyond fixed categories" (80). The novel is Part II of a bildungsroman by Marjane Satrapi depicting her childhood up to her early adult years in Iran and elsewhere during and after the Islamic revolution. Bernstein finds that as students better understand the relationship between the verbal and visual intersections of the text, they also begin to understand their Iranian protagonist, despite the cultural divide. Bernstein writes, "The graphic novel presented an opportunity for students to variously observe, and construct, Marjane's responses to her own multiply-determined, multiply-contextualized and re-contextualized experiences… offering the reader constant opportunity for making meaning from unfamiliar circumstances, and casting many of Marjane's experiences as analogous to the struggles of young women in my class" (86).

The graphic novel as bildungsroman can address diversity issues in thoughtful and engaging ways. Manning (2002), in fact, maintains that diversity should be considered among adolescent developmental tasks. Manning argues that teaching about diversity helps students achieve socially responsible behavior, which "includes acting in a civil manner and demonstrating mutual respect… [and] includes taking a stand against racism, discrimination, and injustice" (77). Juneau and Sucharov (2010) talk about how graphic novels can promote diversity, and how stories with adolescent protagonists coming of age can be particularly powerful. Boatright (2010) writes about his experiences teaching students about United States issues of immigration with graphic novels. For today's students, Boatright believes that graphic novels are the starting point for classroom dialogue. In regard to immigrant experiences he writes that "graphic novels can be a provocative recourse for engaging in complex issues surrounding immigration and immigrant experiences" (468). The graphic novels Boatright uses, like *American Born Chinese* which is about being the son of immigrants, not only help native students relate to the experiences of immigrants, but also help immigrant students appropriate their own experiences. Versaci (2001) writes that using graphic

novels as part of the curriculum can "increase and diversify the voices that our students experience in the classroom and suggest to them that literature can take various forms" (66).

Example for the Secondary Classroom

Following is a brief version of a lesson example Schwarz (2008) has used previously for classroom learning in media/multiple literacies: the short story "Hurdles" by Derek Kirk Kim from his collection *Same Difference and Other Stories* (2003). This coming of age story touches on questions of identity, belonging, and diversity. Both pre- and in-service teachers have found this lesson engaging. A secondary teacher could easily create a multiple-day unit in media literacy.

First, after the students have read the story and taken some time to think about it, perhaps writing a quick write to record their first impressions, the following discussion questions can introduce this graphic novel story as a real literary piece that operates through multiple literacies. The class can be divided into small groups to discuss each of the following questions, and then the groups report back for a whole class discussion.

1. What is the plot of this story? What happens? (traditional literacy)
2. What kind of person is the coach? How can you tell from what he says? From how   he looks/ is shown? (traditional and visual literacy)
3. How would you feel if you were the boy in the story and why? What would you do? Have you ever felt discriminated against? (traditional and visual)
4. Would this story be different if it were in black and white? Would it be different as a prose story with no pictures? (visual literacy)
5. Usually in graphic novel stories, most of the words are to be found in speech bubbles. Here, most of the story is narration on the side. What effect does that have? Also, how does the choice of font affect you? (media literacy—focuses on the unique conventions of each medium)
6. What is the significance of the title "Hurdles" and the way it is written? (traditional and visual)

After class discussion (during which someone always notices something the teacher has not and students have differing viewpoints), the teacher assigns either one or several short stories or episodes from other bildungsroman graphic novels and asks the students to ask and answer these same kinds of questions. Good

sources include Escape from Special by Miss Lasko-Gross (2006) about a nonconformist who wants desperately to be accepted, and One Hundred Demons by Lynda Barry (2002) , whose "demons" include a shouting mom and her first job. This assignment could be in-class work or homework to be discussed the next day.

The next lesson (or mini-lesson) uses "Hurdles" for exploring information literacy. Again, group work may prove most engaging, and this lesson could be set up like a "scavenger hunt" (assuming there are enough computers available) with the following to be "found."

1. More information on the author, Derek Kirk Kim (found in at least three different places).
2. A list of other works by this author from at least three places.
3. Two book reviews of Kim's work from different sources.
4. Two to three places where one could get more of/ purchase Kim's work and what the cost would be.
5. What do two librarians and or literary critics have to say about Kim's work?

While students report back to the whole class, the teacher can present such questions as how does one know if an online source is good or not? How do reviews by "regular" people differ from reviews by experts (critics, librarians…)? How does Facebook affect their personal reading (if at all), and how does wikipedia work? The point is to encourage critical thinking, not to come to certain conclusions.

For a final lesson on media literacy, the following might make group or individual projects that could be done in class or out, and shared with and critiqued by everyone:

1. Some graphic novels are published online (Same Differences and Other Stories was first published online). Find, tell about the story, and describe the experience of reading a graphic novel online. (media literacy)
2. Change this story into a storyboard for a short video. How does your process work? Reflect on your creation process. Do you think the graphic novel or the video would be better and why? (all literacies)
3. Create your own graphic novel short story (1-2 pages) about a time during which you felt you were treated unfairly, discriminated against. What is the hardest aspect to do?

He drove us especially hard this one particular practice before a track meet with a rival high school. We circled the track, around and around, endlessly. Anyone who stepped off that beaten track was punished with more laps.

You're Korean, aren't you?

Finally, I couldn't go on anymore without water, so I parted from my lane and ran to the drinking fountain.

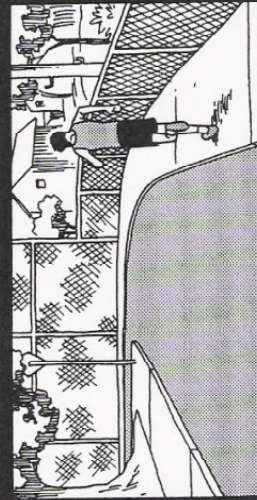When I turned around, Pear-Nose was staring down at me.

Because the Chinese are smart.
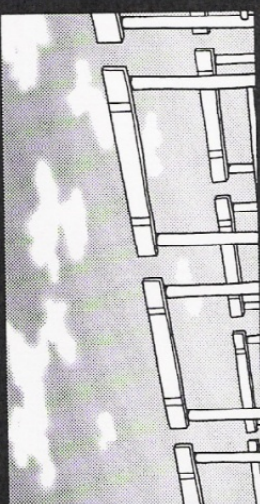
How did you know?

Yes.

Then he told me to run back onto the track. I started to run. I ran through the grass, past the baseball field, out of the main gate, and straight to my house.

I jump hurdles every day.

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HURDLES

I jump hurdles every day. While everyone else on the track team runs straight through, my fellow hurdlers and I go up and down, up and down. Some hurdlers jump over the hurdles, and others kick them down. I jump over them.

Sometimes I'd like to just kick them out of my way, but I guess I'm just too polite. But who cares, I can cross the finish line and that's all that matters. Besides, my coach says either way is just fine.
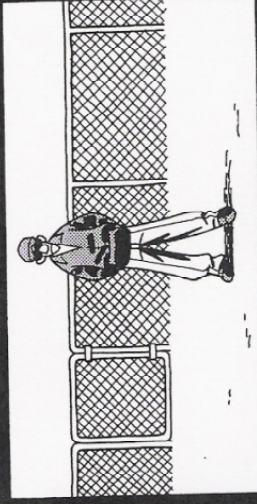
We call our coach "Pear-Nose". There's always a pair of black sunglasses atop that nose of his. And he always stands with his hands behind his back. Now that I think about it, I've never seen his hands. Maybe he doesn't have any hands, I don't know.

The kinds of activities suggested above also reflect NAMLE's *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the United States* (http://namle.net/publications/core-principles/). Active inquiry and critical thinking in and about diverse forms of media are goals, and "co-learning pedagogies, in which teachers learn from students and students learn from teachers and classmates" (Principle 3.4) are used.

Conclusion

Including bildungsroman graphic novels in the classroom encourages reader interest and connects life and school. Many graphic novels lend themselves well to teaching media/multiple literacies, supporting adolescent development, and helping students grapple with diversity issues. Of course, ultimately the new media, like the old, will only succeed in that they offer good stories.

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