

Literacy Applications of Graphic Novels in Secondary English Language Arts

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2001  
Secondary School Education Post Degree Professional Program,  
University of Victoria, 2002

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Dr. James Nahachewsky, Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
**Departmental Member**

## **Abstract**

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This project examines the literacy applications of using graphic novels in secondary English language arts. Graphic novels are multimodal texts that combine print text and images in a sequential narrative. Bringing these texts into the classroom has shown to be an effective way to teach literacy to a wide variety of learners, including English language learners and at-risk youth. This project provides a detailed look at the current academic research in using graphic novels in education, viewed through the theoretical lens of the New London Group's concepts of multiliteracies and multimodalities. A number of approaches to bringing graphic novels into the classroom are outlined, with an emphasis on Rosenblatt's concept of aesthetic reading. Included is a list of recommended teacher resources, a list of graphic novels that are suitable for high school, and a list of graphic novels for adults that showcase the medium's diversity.

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## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to my supportive and patient family members – without you I could not have undertaken this intense educational expedition. I am particularly grateful for the consummate wisdom provided by my wife, Carrie, who helped me through the valleys and plateaus of the writing process.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### My Journey Away from Comics and Back Again

As an avid lifelong reader, I have the fondest memories of lying in a hammock as a child reading *Archie* comics. Looking down at the artificially vibrant inks muted by the flickering shade provided by the cherry tree above, I was simultaneously savouring summer vacation in my parents' back yard, while virtually attending Riverdale High with Archie and his pals. It was those moments of sheer immersion in the print medium that fostered my love of reading. Could I have developed such an aesthetically profound connection with books without those childhood afternoons spent engaging with comics? Perhaps; but what is clear is those iconic images etched themselves into my developing adolescent mind and left me with a deep appreciation for the written word.

Inevitably, once I hit high school, and later moved on to study English literature in earnest at university, my comics were relegated to the recycling bin of childhood memories. Much like hockey cards and video games, comics seemed a thing that would need to be left in the past in order for me to enter adulthood. During my twenties, as I shifted from books with images to “serious” literature, I had no idea that comics and graphic novels would be something I would eventually return to. After a few years of teaching middle school, my school's librarian introduced me to graphic novels through her well-stocked shelves. As head of the English department, I felt I had an obligation to keep up with trends in popular publishing. I had witnessed many of my students devouring manga series such as *Naruto* (Kishimoto, 2003) and *Full Metal Alchemist*

(Arakawa, 2005), but those held little appeal for a thirty-year-old teacher. Although I had heard of Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), I had never had occasion to read it. Once I sat down and immersed myself in Spiegelman's historically-accurate-yet-cartoonish depiction of the Holocaust, I was provided with insights into Nazi Germany that I had not gleaned during history class. I was intrigued that a medium typically viewed as childish could affect me so profoundly. Once the seal had been broken, I delved deeper into the world of graphic novels, searching the internet for "Best Of" lists, my school's library, the public library, as well as local bookstores and comic shops to find high-quality works. I was a bit put off, initially, by the mainstream focus on superheroes and grisly violence. It took perseverance to track down the types of graphic novels that I feel are best suited for classroom use. The graphic novels I have the deepest affinity for are primarily nonfiction, historical fiction, or biographical in nature. This top shelf collection of graphic novels distinguishes itself from some of the more widely popular manga and comics-based titles by delving more deeply into real-life issues and emotions in a way that is more intellectually engaging.

In the last five years I have read over one hundred graphic novels, many of which are suitable for use in school. While teaching middle school, I used those graphic novels that were age-appropriate and was gratified by students' responses; however, I feel extremely fortunate to have transferred to the local high school, where the older students have the maturity to read some of the more serious texts. After having taught middle school for over a decade, it has been rewarding to delve into more controversial and thought-provoking themes, such as drug addiction, sexual identity, war crimes, revolution and genocide. As a middle school humanities teacher I had been focusing on

ways to use international graphic novels (written in English, or in translation) in social studies, and as a result, I developed a collection of titles that explore Middle Eastern themes. Now that I have switched to teaching high school English and Communications, I will keep seeking out titles that meet the interests and curricular needs of my students. This will take some time, since the library at my new school does not possess the same wide range of graphic novels as my previous school. So far, I seem to be the sole member of my school's English department who is teaching a graphic novels unit. I hope that this master's project will serve as a research-based inspiration for some of my colleagues to recognize graphic novels as a valid form of text, one well-suited for use with high school students. See Appendix A for suggestions with how to start teaching with graphic novels.

### **Significance of Teaching Using Graphic Novels**

For many years, the literary and academic community did not take graphic novels seriously, and as such, their use in schools was more the exception than the rule. Graphic novels gained widespread media attention as a valid medium when Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize for *Maus* in 1992. There has also been an increase in the scholarship of graphic novels, in part due to the work of two widely-respected comic and graphic novel artists: Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) was one of the first comprehensive studies of the medium. Published nearly a decade later, McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) has gone on to become the definitive guide to the study of the modern medium of comics and graphic novels.

The term graphic novel was first used in 1964 by Richard Kyle, an American publisher (Di Liddo, 2009, p. 15) and was later brought into common parlance by Will

Eisner, who used the term on the cover of his 1978 book *A Contract with God* (Eisner, 1985; Wolk, 2007). There are a wide variety of definitions for the term, ranging from Gorman's (2003) definition of a graphic novel as "an original book-length story, either fiction or nonfiction, published in comic book style" (p. xii); to Weiner (2003) defining graphic novels as "book-length comic books that are meant to be read as one story" (Preface, p.2); to Yang's (2008) especially succinct definition of a graphic novel as "any comic book thick enough to need a spine" (p. 186). Suffice to say, graphic novels, in combining visual images and alphabetic text, are a type of multimodal text. It is also important to keep in mind, as Wolk definitively states: "Comics [including graphic novels] are not a genre; they're a *medium*" (2007, p. 11). Some people tend to conflate the definition "graphic novel" with "superhero comics." To be clear, the *medium* of graphic novels contains many distinct genres, much as the medium of film contains many genres. For the purposes of using graphic novels in education, the focus should be primarily on the substantive, thought-provoking genres contained within the graphic novels medium.

Graphic novels fall into the category of multimodal texts: that is, they blend more than one mode of expression (specifically, print text plus images). The academic acceptance of multimodal texts came into vogue starting with the New London Group's foundational paper "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" (1996). This academic group paper suggested that to incorporate new literacies, those relevant for the students of our modern age, educators must expand the definition of "text" beyond the printed word to include images, sounds, gestures, and multimodal forms of expression (i.e. print text plus visuals, sound plus video, etc.). The article sent shock waves through

the literacy community, forcing educators to question the way they had been teaching literacy since the start of the twentieth century. The New London Group pushed for broader definitions of *text* and *literacy* itself, encouraging teachers to help their students acquire the skills they need to thrive as consumers, critics and producers of modern media.

The youth of today live in a culture saturated with images and screen-based entertainment. Students more commonly experience video games and movies, as well as visual media such as YouTube, TV, and advertising, than print text on its own. Graphic novels are a way to bring this out-of-school knowledge of visual information into the classroom. Judging by the number of movies inspired by graphic novels, such as *300*, *V for Vendetta*, *Sin City*, *Watchmen*, *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Persepolis* and *Red*, this is a widely popular medium. Tapping into pop culture helps students see that what they learn at school is reflective of, and relevant to, their lives outside of the classroom (Choo, 2010; & Chun, 2009). Using graphic novels in the high school setting is also a way to create an increased awareness of visual media and develop critical literacy (Frey & Fisher, 2004).

During the last decade academic researchers have investigated how comics and graphic novels can be used to teach literacy outcomes, including Bitz (2004); Jewitt (2005, 2008); Hughes, King, Perkins, and Fuke (2011); and Connors (2013). A Canadian literacy researcher who has published extensively on teaching using picture books and graphic novels is Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, & 2013b). All of these educational researchers have used graphic novels in ways that support literacy. It is my current goal

to explore how graphic novels can be used to support literacy learning in the high school setting.

### **Experience Using Graphic Novels with Students**

I first introduced graphic novels to my students four years ago, while I was teaching at the middle school level. With the help of the school librarian, I amassed literature circle sets of five copies each of seven titles. After a successful first year, we added more titles, bringing the total to a dozen different graphic novels, with five or six copies of each. I followed a similar basic unit plan, which I refined with repeated experiences.

To start the graphic novels unit, I first familiarized students with the elements and conventions of the medium. This is an essential starting point, according to leading researchers in the field (Chun, 2009; Connors, 2012, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). The elements of graphic novels include things such as panels (the squares that contain the images), the layout of panels on the page, gutters (spaces between panels), speech and thought bubbles, font types, sound effects, perspective, angle, point of view, colour, contrast (between dark and light), juxtapositions (of visual elements or subject matter), facial expressions, gestures, distance between characters, “bleed” (when images extend beyond the walls of an individual panel), splash pages (full-page panels), shot distance (ranging from establishing, long-distance shot to extreme close up), depth cues, the use of colour to add emphasis or convey emotion, along with other basic aspects of visual and artistic design. Providing students with this background knowledge gives them the metalanguage necessary to fully

appreciate, critically analyse, and discuss the graphic novels. Metalanguage, to be clear, is the use of specific terminology to discuss or analyse a form of communication (in most cases, a language, hence the term “meta”-language). In this instance, the metalanguage is the lexicon of terms used to describe the “language” communicated through the images and words of the graphic novels medium.

In the next phase, students selected and read the novels independently, and then had small group discussions. We then proceeded to talk about how graphic novels differ from print text novels, and we held a formal debate about which medium is superior. During the unit, students created 8-panel comics about one of the books they had chosen. The culminating writing and representing activity was to have students create an original comic, typically two to three pages in length. After three years of teaching this three-week-long graphic novels unit, I felt confident in having narrowed down the titles that were most interesting to my grade 8 middle school students. Before I had a chance to teach the graphic novels unit this year, I transferred to high school. Although some of the titles I have previously taught will still appeal to older students, I have now ordered titles that are primarily suited to use with high school students. I do not have any firsthand experience of seeing secondary teachers use graphic novels in their classrooms; for this reason I am very excited to add to the collective knowledge in this field.

In order to have research-based evidence for my suggestion to add graphic novels to the secondary English curriculum, I had to first go to the existing literature. I wanted to gain an understanding of the current state of research in the use of graphic novels, particularly in high school. I came to the literature with two research questions: 1. What do we know about the value of graphic novels in supporting literacy learning?; and 2.

How can graphic novels be used to support literacy learning in a high school English classroom? These questions form the basis of my review of the literature (Chapter 2). The theoretical framework used for this literature review is also explored in the upcoming chapter. Finally, Chapter 3 of this master's project is a summary of key findings including an abridged summation of three key articles, several implications for pedagogy, as well as my suggestions for future research in this area.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### Introduction to the Literature Review

During my time as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher for the last twelve years, I have been particularly interested in the ways students interact with and respond to texts. I began using graphic novels in 2010 for a few reasons: I enjoyed them personally; I recognized their usefulness in broaching complex topics in an accessible way; and I knew many of my students read them outside of school (so I hoped they would enjoy using them in class). Reading the New London Group’s “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” (1996) further reinforced my decision to use graphic novels in school. The way the New London Group so compellingly framed the need to incorporate new literacies resonated with the media and communication transformations that I was witnessing first hand in the classroom—particularly in relation to the ways I saw students interacting with and creating multimodal texts online. It was at that point that I began to comprehend the importance of bringing multimodal texts into my classroom, as a way to equip my students with the literacy skills they will use most widely in their lives outside of school.

Students today must be multi-literate to be successful communicators and informed consumers of media (New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2011). Because the texts traditionally used in high school classrooms are primarily mono-modal (print-text only), the common strategies that we use to teach reading comprehension might not sufficiently help students to adequately understand texts that contain visuals. Teaching students to create, interact with and think critically about multimodal texts is more

important now than at any time previously (Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011), and therefore, it is necessary to teach using multimodal texts (such as graphic novels) as a way to help students better understand and become competent in multimodal literacy.

It is crucial that the education students receive in school be relevant to their lives outside of school, and there are various approaches that teachers can use to equip students with methods for understanding and building meaning from the texts they are immersed in during their day-to-day lives (Avgerinou, 2009). One perspective is to teach visual literacy as a starting point, by bringing in picturebooks and graphic novels to increase students' in-school exposure to multimodal analysis (Dallacqua, 2012; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Additionally, bringing in high-interest materials promotes student discussion, which improves comprehension of these texts (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Frey & Fisher, 2004).

When we welcome modern text forms into the class, we validate the literacies that students bring in from other areas of their lives (Choo, 2010; & Chun, 2009). The skillset learned while studying multimodal texts in school will carry over to students in their interactions in the outside world, therefore enabling our students to be successful lifelong learners (Ajayi, 2009). Teaching visual and multimodal literacy is giving them a life skill that can have a lasting positive impact on their lives. This is an area that highly interests me, and I believe it is of great value to my students. By sharing multimodal texts enthusiastically with my classes, I hope they will share in the excitement and enjoyment of exploring this relatively young literary medium.

To really understand the power contained within multimodal texts, we can look back to the semiotic theories of Halliday (1976), who demonstrated that symbols can

have different meanings based on different contexts, and as they are viewed by different people with different purposes in mind. To analyze multimodal texts, we can study the elements of visual grammar (Kress & Jewitt, 2003), which are practical rules for analysing the meaning conveyed by visual images. By bringing in picture books, comics and graphic novels, we can teach the students the metalanguage which we can use to discuss the various elements and possible meanings conveyed (Chun, 2009; Connors, 2012, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Once we are speaking a common language, and we've familiarized ourselves with these elements of visual design, we can unpack meaning, thereby revealing powerful semiotic tools that can be used by our students for their own purposes (Ajayi, 2009; Bitz, 2004; Chun; Connors, 2012, 2013; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al., 2011; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

Students comment that they are not choosing to read for enjoyment, in part because there are so many competing media that capture their attention (social media, online gaming, etc.). Perhaps by using reading materials that more closely resemble the texts today's youth are most interested in, we can encourage students to see value in building on their literacy skills. Graphic novels, by bridging the gap between the printed word and the visual realm, are an excellent resource to use for this purpose. Reading comics and graphic novels requires readers to link words and images together, much like many of the texts they experience while using handheld digital devices, or when interacting online.

When reading multimodal texts, the reader must synthesize meaning from various modes, such as visual and linguistic, which is the case in print graphic novels (Carter,

2008; Chun, 2009; Connors, 2013; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). The print text and images in graphic novels are mutually dependent on one another, and blend together to create meaning for the reader (Versaci, 2007). When this occurs, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and there is a communicative symbiosis between text and visuals. Despite the anecdotal evidence and advice shared on websites, in journal articles (Annett, 2008; Boatright, 2010; Brenner, 2006; Hansen, 2012; Ranker, 2007; Schwartz, & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006; Schwarz, 2007; Seyfried, 2008; Simon, 2012; Snowball, 2005; Thomas, 2011; & Whitlock, 2006) and in many instructional books (Bakis, 2012; Bitz, 2009; Carter, 2007; Gavigan & Tomasevich, 2011; Gorman, 2003; Gravett, 2005; Monnin, 2010; Versaci, 2007; Weiner, 2004; & Wolk, 2007) (see Appendix B for more educational resource books), there is unfortunately a fundamental lack of primary research into the ways graphic novels have been used to support literacy. The central purpose of this literature review is give an overview of the research, and look at specific examples of different situations in which educational researchers have successfully used graphic novels with students. These contexts fall into the following general categories: 1. using graphic novels in book club reading groups; 2. teaching whole-class graphic novel units, which typically include students creating their own multimodal texts; 3. using graphic novels as a resource to aid reading comprehension; 4. using graphic novels as a way to engage all learners; and 5. using graphic novels with English language learners. By looking at the primary research, it is my goal to answer the following two research questions: 1. What do we know about the value of graphic novels in supporting literacy learning?; and 2. How can graphic novels be used to support literacy learning in a high school English classroom?

## **Theoretical Framework**

In conducting my research into the area of using graphic novels in high school English classes, I am viewing the literature through multiple lenses. The two major lenses I am looking through—my theoretical framework—are as follows: First and foremost, I am looking at graphic novels through the lens of multiliteracies and multimodalities, as put forth by the New London Group (1996), and later researched by other educators, such as Kress and Jewitt (2003). The second theoretical lens I am viewing the literature through is Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of reading (1978).

These theories combine in a way that resonates with my teaching philosophy as well as my research framework. I am a teacher who believes in incorporating learning from outside of school, and that the materials students read in the classroom should have a relevance to their out-of-school lives. I define reading as taking in information through the eyes (or other means, in the case of the visually impaired) with the intention of gaining understanding and/or having an experience (intellectual, emotional or aesthetic). My early joys of reading can be encapsulated rather precisely within Rosenblatt's theory, and The New London Group's definitions of multiliteracies and multimodalities add an updated dimension. Together they showcase the importance of reading a diversity of texts within the high school English class and valuing the varied literacies which students bring to the classroom. The theoretical lenses I am using are complementary, and each offers something to the others that any single lens could not convey alone.

The New London Group's foundational paper "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" (1996) presented clear reasons why the definitions of literacy must be updated to include multiple literacies (multiliteracies) and a variety of texts, including multimodal texts (of which, graphic novels are a print-based example). The New London Group outlined changes occurring in all spheres of human experience: working lives, public lives, and private lives. Their outlook also clearly outlined some of the aspects of design that can be taught to help today's learners. The New London Group proposed a pedagogy that includes several aspects: situated practice, overt instruction (including the explicit teaching of the metalanguage required for discussion and analysis of the specific medium), critical framing, and transformed practice. By immersing students in a community of learners, teachers allow them to co-create meanings together. The overt instruction component of the New London Group's proposed pedagogy provides students with a metalanguage which they can employ to share knowledge and critically analyze the texts they work with. The culminating stage of "transformed practice" allows students to carry away something of lasting value; something which they can compare with other components of their world.

The New London Group's concept of multimodality and multiliteracies is particularly relevant for the subject of graphic novels in English class, since it addresses the need for a diversity of texts (including multimodal texts) and a variety of literacies (which challenges the old notion of one definitive literacy—involving the reading and writing of language according to definitive, established rules) (1996). Because of the changes occurring in society, it is essential that teachers incorporate new literacies into their classroom practice (New London Group). In this vein, visual literacy arises as one

of the crucial competencies that students require. In their theory of multiliteracies, The New London Group offered a description of a variety of design elements: Linguistic, Visual, Audio, Gestural, Spatial, and Multimodal. Multimodal literacy can envelop the others, as most of the other elements manifest in combination. For example, written text is predominantly linguistic, yet it is at the same time visual (such as in the case of the chosen font, layout on the page, etc.) (New London Group). Graphic novels very clearly show the interplay of linguistic and visual design elements, while at the same time depicting gestural and spatial elements (in the characters depicted). In cases where sound effects are represented (as in most graphic novels), the element of audio is also implied. In my teaching practice, I endeavour to incorporate and apply the theories outlined by the New London Group (1996), much like Kress and Jewitt (2003) did in the examples they cited within *Multimodal Literacy*. I feel that using graphic novels in the secondary English classroom provides an opportune way to do this. The theories put forth by the New London Group were a logical starting point for an investigation into the use of multimodal texts, such as graphic novels.

As a result of the way I have used graphic novels with my classes, in alignment with my philosophy of having students read for immersive enjoyment during class time, I have largely viewed the research literature through the lens of Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (1978). Rosenblatt was an educational innovator, particularly in the area of reading comprehension. Her Transactional Theory was introduced in her widely-cited work *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978). Rosenblatt continued to refine the theory in "The Aesthetic Transaction" (1986), and published a further version in "The Transactional Theory of Reading and

Writing” (1994). To understand why Rosenblatt’s theory is so well-suited to the use of graphic novels in secondary English class, I will explain its key aspects.

The fundamental concept of the Transactional Theory is that a transaction occurs when a specific reader engages with a particular text in a particular place and time. During this immersive and back-and-forth transaction between reader and text, an evocation can take place. The evocation, according to Rosenblatt, is “what the reader ‘responds to’” (1986, p. 124). The evocation is a unique entity, and is shaped by the aforementioned factors of text, reader, time and situation. The evocation (*not* the text itself) is ultimately what the reader interacts with, remembers, contemplates, experiences and comprehends (Rosenblatt, 1986). The evocation is an especially important aspect of reading graphic novels, since visual imagery is open to such a range of interpretations, and can be viewed through so many different lenses. This allows for students to have unique, personally meaningful evocations to the multimodal texts they read. Only by possessing an adequate vocabulary of graphic novel elements would they be equipped to describe their evocation to their peers. According to Rosenblatt, the manner in which a reading transaction, and ultimately an evocation, can occur is based on the selective attention the reader utilizes during the reading process.

Rosenblatt created the efferent/aesthetic continuum (1986) as a model to illustrate how readers focus their attention while reading. Where a reader is positioned along the continuum will greatly influence the transaction that occurs. When a reader adopts a predominantly efferent stance (at one end of the continuum) their intention is to carry away something from the text, and the focus is on “what is to be extracted and retained” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1066). Efferent reading is best suited to nonfiction texts, or those

texts in which something quantifiable is sought. In contrast, the aesthetic stance (at the other end of the spectrum) is mainly associated with experiencing a text, with a focus on “what is being lived through” (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 124). It is my opinion that most graphic novels are particularly well-suited to being read from a predominantly aesthetic stance, in part because visual images are difficult to describe in words (and take away something efferently quantifiable). Visual images can be dissected efferently, but at a cost to some of their innate power to move the reader emotionally. It is important to keep in mind that the efferent/aesthetic continuum has a multitude of positions, and that most texts will be read from a mixed approach—not entirely efferently, nor completely aesthetically. In fact, Rosenblatt explicitly stated: “Any text can be read either efferently or aesthetically” (1986, p. 124). However, one way she explained the main difference between them is that a person could read a text efferently, then summarize the key points for us; whereas in the case of the aesthetic, “no one else can read a text aesthetically for us” (Rosenblatt, 1986, p. 125). For example, think of the futility in trying to describe a sunset to someone: You can provide them with a detailed physical description, yet the emotional essence of the experience will be lacking. It is similar with reading images; they can be very difficult to describe later, if the intention is to retain some of their emotional impact. By reading graphic novels aesthetically, students gain practice reading from the often undervalued, aesthetic end of the continuum.

To comprehend the enormity of reading aesthetically, it might be helpful to give a more detailed exploration of this side of the efferent/aesthetic spectrum. To start with, one of the main reasons to focus on the aesthetic is that it has been traditionally undervalued in the established academic educational system (Rosenblatt, 1986). The

efferent stance is most commonly adopted when we ask students to read a text for information. To take an aesthetic stance when reading is one way to explore an often overlooked realm of the reading experience—at least as reading is traditionally done within a classroom context. Compared to efferent reading, the aesthetic may not be as easily assessed and quantified; but that does not make it any less meaningful. According to Rosenblatt, reading from a predominantly aesthetic stance encourages “students to savor, deepen the lived-through experience, to recapture and reflect on it” (1986, p. 126). Reading aesthetically involves “perception through the senses, feelings, and intuitions” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1067). The readerly experience I am encouraging during my graphic novel units is reading that elicits an emotional, intellectual or aesthetic response (Phelan, 2007). I hope that by reading graphic novels aesthetically students will gain new experiences and understandings, rather than looking for factual details to take away from the reading.

Due to the visual component of graphic novels (and other types of multimodal texts), there is an intrinsic proclivity to read them from an aesthetic stance. Additionally, as graphic novels contain facial expressions of characters (which convey emotion), students are likely to interact with these texts in a way that elicits “feelings, and intuitions” as per Rosenblatt’s defining characteristics of aesthetic reading (1994, p. 1067). Rosenblatt vividly described the specifics of aesthetic reading when she explained that “the aesthetic reader pays attention to, savors, the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth” (1994, p. 1067). These are vivid descriptions of the type of reading I encourage students to engage in during the graphic novels units I teach.

Aesthetic reading is what created a love of reading in my life, and I wholeheartedly want to share that joy with my students. For students who might be disengaged with print-only texts—who see little value in reading books efferently, merely to regurgitate facts when required on an assessment—reading graphic novels from the aesthetic stance might be a way to engage the sensory/emotional side of their focused attention. In my opinion, graphic novels lend themselves most readily to being read aesthetically, rather than efferently. The reduced quantity of text leaves less room for trivial details that could later show up on a quiz or test. While reading graphic novels aesthetically, readers find themselves immersed in situations along with the characters, engaging with the same surroundings and challenges. The “lived-through experience” that Rosenblatt alluded to in her Transactional Theory is made all the more evident and vivid in well-crafted graphic novels. For students who are not able to visualize what they read, graphic novels offer a potential scaffold for revealing the immersive mental imagery contained within print texts. I have found that starting with the book club approach to reading graphic novels is an ideal way to incorporate Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory. In my opinion, allowing students to choose books that appeal to their reading interests and aptitudes increases the likelihood that they will become more engaged in the reading process. As a result, they are more likely to experience a transaction due to a connection occurring between the reader and the text.

Rosenblatt was also a pioneer of reader response theory, and in order to encourage students to respond deeply to what they have read, the reading environment needs to be suited to that outcome. When students are reading, and enjoying the process of reading, I have found them more willing to share their reactions and responses to the books. While

reading graphic novels aesthetically (as is the case with all aesthetic reading) students can “focus on what was being lived through during the reading [. . .] the images, the sensations, the feelings, the changing moods” (Rosenblatt, 1999, p. 165). By valuing these aspects of the reading process, students are encouraged to tap into their internal feelings and moods, thus increasing the likelihood of meaningful reader responses (Rosenblatt, 1999).

There are other theoretical lenses through which the research on graphic novels in education may have been viewed, most notably, the study of social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005) and visual literacy (Avgerinou, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Serafini, 2011). These are specific areas in their own right; and while I might have been subtly inspired by some of the ideas of social semiotics and visual literacy, they were not the primary lenses through which I viewed the literature. For this literature review, Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory (1978) provided the context—reading aesthetically, while the theories of multiliteracies and multimodality pioneered by the New London Group, (1996) brought focus to the contemporary relevance of the subject at hand: how to use graphic novels to support literacy learning in the secondary English classroom.

### **Using Graphic Novels in Book Club Settings**

One of the ways researchers have framed their studies is by using graphic novels as the focus texts in informal book clubs, typically involving voluntary participation and set outside of class time (Connors, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Sabeti, 2013). One of the goals for the book club format is to study how students interact with

graphic novels in a non-academic setting. Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic reading (1978), with a focus on immersing oneself in the reading process, was cited in three of the researchers' theoretical frameworks (Connors, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012). Rosenblatt (1978) described the text as a "blue print, a guide for selecting, rejecting and ordering of what is being called forth" (p.11). Connors, Dallacqua and Hammond all acknowledged that they wanted their student participants to read deeply and enjoy the experience. Graphic novels are well suited to this purpose: according to Miodrag (2013), in the graphic novel "picture and text are drawn into a rhetorical transaction, gaining in aesthetic impact rather than hard content" (p. 92). As I am also focused on bridging the gap between the ways students read in school versus the ways they read for pleasure, using Rosenblatt's Transactional theory as part of my theoretical framework for this literature review is a natural fit. My fondest memories of reading—particularly those of my youth, spent reading comics—are of those times in which I was firmly grounded in the aesthetic stance.

An interesting study by Connors (2013), using the book club format, sought to answer the following question: "What semiotic resources do high school students draw on as they read graphic novels, and in what ways do they work with these resources?" (p. 38). Connors wanted to shed light on the thinking process students utilize while reading multimodal texts. Connors (2013) attempted to situate the group in a more natural setting for reading, but it remained within a school building. The focus was on reading in a non-academic way, but using critical thinking to analyze and discuss the texts. It was found that students used a combination of visual and linguistic elements to comprehend what they had read. This was also supported by Ajayi's (2009) research with English language

learners, as well as Hammond's (2012) study using *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006).

In the introduction to his study, Connors (2013) cited widely-held views about the value of using graphic novels to motivate reluctant readers, support struggling students, help English language learners, teach visual literacy, and include high-interest texts that are suited to a wide range of abilities. He acknowledged that although these are common reasons given for including graphic novels in an English curriculum, the aforementioned claims have not yet been substantiated by research. Most of the evidence is anecdotal, rather than research-based. This was one of the reasons for Connors' (2013) study: to conduct a case study of how a group of proficient readers at the high school level makes sense of multimodal texts.

Connors (2013) provided some background about the different eras of comic books in relation to literacy. There was a time when comics were viewed as an inferior medium to alphabetic text. Due to the fact that comics contained references to immigrants, vernacular speech, as well frequent critiques of the ruling classes, they were looked down upon by academia. Ironically, these are now some of the very reasons given for including them in ELL classes (Chun, 2009; Ajayi, 2009). There were outspoken critics of comics who claimed that the reading of comics interfered with reading development (Wertham, 1954). The prevailing thought of the day was that the ideas conveyed by written text were superior to those expressed through visual imagery (Connors, 2013). We now live in a world where visual images are more prevalent than the written word alone (Avgerinou, 2009). It was only decades after the Comics Code (a restrictive practice of self-censorship adopted by publishers in order to avoid

government-imposed restrictions on comics) virtually sterilized the medium that authors and artists began to create more freely and distribute works that became a voice for the disenfranchised (Connors, 2013). Once graphic novels such as *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibbons, 1987) and *Dark Night Rises* (Miller, 1986) began to sell in large quantities, publishers started to take the new format seriously. When *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) received the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, reputable book stores and universities took note of the deep narrative potential and literary value of graphic novels. Connors (2013), for the purposes of his book club, defined graphic novels as comics that “present an entire narrative in a single volume” (p. 31).

Connors (2013) began his study by asking English teachers to hand out letters to proficient readers, inviting them to participate in an out-of-school graphic novel reading group. The six students involved were aged 15-17, and were in grades 10 and 11. They were all European American; four were male and two were female. All enjoyed reading and discussing books. They met bi-weekly for 17 weeks, which is the rough equivalent of a single term of high school. Connors intentionally sought out proficient readers in order to challenge the widely-held view that graphic novels are most useful with struggling or reluctant readers. Three of the participants were proficient readers of graphic novels; two had some experience; and one had read only a single graphic novel before the study. Connors used the group as his case, rather than doing a case study on any single participant.

Connors (2013) used two criteria for selecting the graphic novels in his study: 1. All four books appeared on the Young Adult Library Service Association’s 2010 list of “Great Graphic Novels for Teens,” and 2. The selected books showcased a variety of

different design elements and conventions of graphic novels. The four books used in the graphic novel reading club were *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003); *Night Fisher* (Johnson, 2005); *Pride of Baghdad* (Vaughan & Herrichon, 2006); and *Laika* (Abadzis, 2007). The first two titles were in black and white, while the latter two were in colour. During the book club, Connors (2013) introduced some of the common elements of graphic novels – “color, perspective, page layouts, speech balloons, [and] literary conventions” (p. 33). This approach of teaching the language and elements of graphic novels has also been used by other researchers (see for example, Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

Connors (2013) started the book club by having students complete a 31-question reading interest survey, which asked about their attitudes, preferences, and experiences in reading prose fiction (at home and school), as well as their level of experience reading comics, manga and graphic novels. Connors conducted a whole group interview at the first meeting. A second whole group interview occurred part way through. Response journals were kept by each of the participants, and they could respond in writing or visually. During the bi-weekly book club discussions students shared their responses. Connors conducted individual interviews at the halfway point. He asked them to do informal think-alouds, during which time the students verbally described their thinking processes as they read through a scene in one of the novels. The study concluded with a third and final whole group interview, which was a time for students to reflect on the process of participating and re-visit the initial interview questions to see how they had changed during the study.

Connors (2013) coded all response journals, transcripts of group discussions and individual interviews. For data analysis, Connors looked for recurring patterns in the group, distinguishing between references to linguistic design and visual design. Connors was looking for which semiotic resources the students drew upon to comprehend the graphic novels. Students referred most to visual elements, rather than linguistic elements. Facial expressions were the most commonly referenced visual element. Students also used perspective, colour, layout, body position and distances between character, as well as value (differences in dark shading and light areas) and juxtaposition. Connors found evidence of students filling in the gaps to construct meaning, which aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978) theory of transactional reading. One specific example of gap filling was documented in one of the interviews: Connors asked the student to explain a scene from *Night Fisher*, and the student elaborated on the feelings of the father, as expressed through the visual paneling, layout, facial expression and tone of voice (as represented by a different font type). This is one example of evidence that students synthesized meaning by blending visual and linguistic elements, and suggests that they were active readers. Connors (2013) purported that the reading of graphic novels uses different processes than the reading of print-based alphabetic texts. The fact that reading them does not rely solely upon linguistic text is one of the reasons some educators suggest English language learners can benefit from graphic novels (Chun, 2009).

Connors (2013) aimed to find out "how actual readers read graphic novels" (p. 47). Since the sample size was so small, there could be no generalizations made. Future studies could use a similar format, but with students from different demographics and different reading aptitudes. Connors did think the fact that the reading group was held at

school (even though it was after hours) might have put a focus on more scholastic discussion, as opposed to less formal, out-of-school discussion. Connors found that students drew on lots of semiotic resources while reading the graphic novels. The students interpreted the books in ways that made sense to them. Connors also found that students lacked an awareness of the value of the resources they brought. The New London Group (1996) suggested that teachers need to recognize and value the multiple literacies and unique background perspectives that students bring from outside the classroom. Connors also acknowledged that it is important for teachers to show students what they know, so they can bring this meta-awareness to tasks of critical literacy. Connors found that reading and responding to graphic novels provided opportunities for critiquing and analyzing visuals, which increased visual and multimodal literacies. With these findings in mind, it is essential for educators to broaden their definitions of literacy to encompass the types of texts students encounter most frequently: multimodal. Out-of-school book clubs, like the one Connors studied, are one way to effectively get students reading and understanding graphic novels. Other educators bring the books right into the classroom, to use them as central texts in meeting literacy outcomes (Chun, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al., 2011; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). I will now explore the benefits of this approach, with particular emphasis on the work of Pantaleo.

### **Teaching Graphic Novel Units in the Classroom**

Moving a step beyond reading and discussing graphic novels, some educators have gone on to have students apply the elements and conventions in creating their own multimodal texts (Bitz, 2004; Christianakis, 2011; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al.,

2011; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Some of these studies have focused on marginalized and at-risk youth, one example of which (Hughes et al., 2011) I will go into more detail in a later section. For now, I'd like to offer an overview of the early research in this area (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004) before delving into the analysis of a more recent case study (Pantaleo, 2012).

Bitz (2004) was an early innovator in this approach to teaching students how to create their own multimodal texts for literacy purposes. Bitz's Comic Book Project occurred during three months in 2002, and involved over 700 children at 33 different facilities. These were some of the goals of the project: to see if pictorial representations would help students make literacy connections and to see if previously marginalized students could stay engaged in a project including extensive reading and writing. In the end, students created comics exploring themes that came directly from their life experiences, such as drug abuse, gang activity and family dysfunction.

After Bitz's (2004) project, students were asked to complete a survey, and the responses were overwhelmingly positive, showing a strong correlation between participating in the program and getting better at reading stories with images, creating original stories with images, and gaining enjoyment in the process. The results of the staff survey showed that 90% of the staff believed that students were getting better at writing and reading stories with images, and 92% felt that their students enjoyed writing their own stories. The project was also found to have met four of the New York State Learning Standards for English Language Arts, which include reading, writing, listening and speaking for information, understanding, expression, analysis and social interaction. The project was viewed as an overwhelming success, particularly since it had involved

participants with limited English language skills. Bitz went on to publish a book (*Manga High*, 2009) about encouraging students to create their own comic books, a process that engages their interests and combines reading, writing, and representing into one pleasurable package.

Building on Bitz's (2004) ground-breaking approach, Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) has conducted multiple research projects using the following general framework with students: show and analyse the visual and textual elements of picturebooks and graphic novels; read multimodal texts independently and look for specific elements; discuss the elements using a common metalanguage; and finally, apply that knowledge to create short form graphic novels (multipage multimodal texts). A study that clearly shows the value of this approach was conducted by Pantaleo in 2012 with middle school students. At the outset, Pantaleo noted the lack of research in the area of students creating graphic novels. Pantaleo framed her study around three general areas: 1. How can we teach the literary and visual elements of graphic novels?; 2. How does knowledge of these elements affect students' understanding of these texts?; and 3. How will students apply this knowledge when creating their own multimodal texts? (2012, p. 298).

Pantaleo (2012) conducted her study in a grade 7 class during 10 weeks of 2009. Pantaleo first introduced students to the visual and literary elements prevalent in picturebooks. When students are aware of the elements and conventions of graphic novels, they are better able to understand, be critical of, and more competently create multimodal texts. Theorists in the field of comic book studies, such as McCloud (1993, 2006), have contributed heartily to the discourse of graphic novel elements. In books

such as *Understanding Comics* (1993) and *Making Comics* (2006) McCloud has helped establish a lexicon of terms that apply to the creation and comprehension of elements of the comics and graphic novels medium. Pantaleo used some of the specific elements described by McCloud (2006) as the basis of her graphic novels' metalanguage.

Pantaleo's (2012) graphic novels unit then expanded to include students reading and analysing the art elements and graphic novel conventions in four books: *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006); *Babymouse: Queen of the World* (Holm & Holm, 2005); *Amulet* (Kibuishi, 2008); and *Coraline* (Gaiman & Russell, 2008). The study's culminating activity involved the students applying their knowledge by creating their own graphic novels. Specific criteria were established, and the students spent 11 classes working on their finished products. Data collected included written responses, transcripts of discussions, transcripts of individual interviews, student questionnaires, a research journal, and the students' completed graphic novels.

For Pantaleo's (2012) case study, one girl's graphic novel was analysed in depth. Some of the graphic novel elements included in the multimodal text were paneling; speech bubbles and typography; line; colour; point of view; and perspective. Pantaleo found that the act of teaching students a common metalanguage of visual and literary elements helped fuel discussion of the books that were read, which later translated into students incorporating said elements into their own creations. This idea can be traced to The New London Group's (1996) position paper about how we can change our teaching pedagogies to more precisely help students become competent consumers and creators of multimodal texts. Additionally, looking for and talking about the elements and conventions helped students engage in critical visual analysis of multimodal texts

(Pantaleo, 2012). This corroborates the findings of other researchers in this area (Chun, 2009; Connors, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Hughes et al., 2012). Pantaleo found that students enjoyed reading these books, and were “highly motivated to design their own multimodal metafictional texts at the end of the project” (2012, p. 311). This was similar to the findings of Chun (2009) and Hughes et al. (2011). Pantaleo also concluded that reading and designing multimodal texts required complex cognitive skills, particularly in the ability to “interpret the interdependence of the semiotic resources of image and word” (2012, p. 311). This aligns with the findings of Connors (2013) in his out-of-school graphic novel book club, as well as Chun (2009).

Having students read graphic novels for enjoyment is becoming more common, in my experience, particularly in elementary and middle schools. Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) and Connors (2013) have shown that there are complex thinking processes involved in comprehending these texts. This leads to the next logical topic of inquiry: Do graphic novels have a positive impact on reading comprehension?

### **Using Graphic Novels as Tools to Aid Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is one of the most important aspects of school-based literacy. Students must be able to understand what they have read in order to learn from it and incorporate it into their knowledge base. Surprisingly, however, there have been very few studies that have looked into the impact of graphics on reading comprehension. One of these few is a study conducted by Sabbah, Masood, and Iranmanesh (2013), who examined how reading graphic novels affected the reading comprehension of Malaysian grade 5 students. Another study, conducted by Norman (2012) did not directly involve

graphic novels, but instead focused on the impact of including visuals when elementary students were reading informational texts. I will begin with a description of Norman's research.

Norman's (2012) study was prompted, in part, by dual coding theory, which asserts that the brain processes written text and graphics in different ways (Paivio, 1991). The research was conducted to discover more information about the subject of how visual images can have an impact on the comprehension of informational texts, as prior research had proven inconclusive. It was discovered that reading the graphics caused students to use a wide range of processes; however, there was no significant correlation found between these graphics-reading thought processes and comprehension. Students who used a greater number of processes did score higher on the retelling section of the study; therefore, Norman (2012) found that reading graphics in informational texts may help students clearly retell what they have read, but there was no significant impact shown on comprehension. Caution is advised in transferring Norman's findings to the reading of graphic novels, as the study was conducted using informational texts only.

In contrast to Norman (2012), Sabbah et al.'s (2013) study involved the use of graphic novels with English language learners. The researchers acknowledged that there is a lack of research in the area of how reading graphic novels effects reading comprehension. The objectives of the study were as follows: 1. To discover whether reading graphic novels improves students' reading comprehension when compared to text-only novels; 2. To investigate the impact of simple graphic novels compared to simple text-only novels on the reading comprehension of visual and verbal learners; and 3. To explore the effect of difficult graphic novels compared to difficult text-only novels

on the reading comprehension of visual and verbal learners. The study was conducted with 60 grade 5 Malaysian students.

Sabbah et al. (2013) used Felder and Silverman's Index of Learning Styles to group the participants into two categories: visual learners and verbal learners. However, it is important to note that the theory of "learning styles" is highly contested among the educational research community, and some researchers feel that the theory—though widely accepted by the public—at the very least needs more research-based evidence (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008). According to the "learning styles" theory used by Sabbah et al., students have different preferences when it comes to how they learn and express themselves: some are visually inclined, while others are more comfortable in different modes, such as art, music, or movement (Ajayi, 2009; Monnin, 2013). The students in Sabbah et al.'s study were assessed as being primarily visual learners (28) or verbal learners (32). Sabbah et al. defined reading comprehension as the ability to "decode the words on the page and to extract meaning" (p. 150). To assess comprehension, a one-way ANCOVA and repeated-measures *t*-test were used. Students started the study by answering a questionnaire, based on Felder and Silverman's Index of Learning Styles. The next day, students read a simple textual novel, then answered 12 multiple-choice questions. The day after that, students read a difficult textual novel and answered 12 multiple-choice questions. On the following day, students read a simple graphic novel, followed by 12 multiple-choice questions. On the final day of in-class research the students read a difficult graphic novel, then answered 12 multiple-choice questions. The test scores were marked and compared based on the different learning styles, as well as the different text types and complexity levels. The last step was to

investigate whether the students' knowledge of English had had an effect on their reading comprehension, so the students' final semester English marks and exam scores were collected.

The findings of Sabbah et al. (2013) were that students' reading comprehension scores were higher for textual novels than for graphic novels. The researchers suggested that one reason for this could be that "reading multi-modal texts (e.g., graphic novels) is a challenging task for students having difficulty in understanding the meaning and finding the relationship between pictures and texts" (Sabbah et al., p. 155). The fact that reading graphic novels involves complex thinking skills is supported by the research of Connors (2013) and Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). According to Sabbah et al.'s findings, the comprehension of difficult graphic novels was superior in visual learners when compared to verbal learners. There was no difference in comprehension of simple graphic novels between the two learning styles. It is possible that the less visually-literate students lacked the appropriate reading and viewing strategies needed to understand graphic novels (Sabbah et al.). Additionally, Sabbah et al. found that there was no difference in comprehension of the textual novels (both simple and difficult) between visual and verbal learners.

The conclusions of Sabbah et al. (2013) are that difficult graphic novels will be more easily comprehended by visual learners. The authors suggested that graphic novels might be most effective for visual learners, and could be useful for reluctant and struggling readers who have a proclivity towards visual content (Sabbah et al.). Given that "learning styles" are so contested causes me to call into question some of the findings of Sabbah et al.'s study. According to Miodrag (2013), it is debatable whether

the print text and images can collapse into one multimodal resource, as there are examples of graphic novels where the text and images are each telling contrasting and, at times, contradictory stories (p. 98). It is possible that there were instances of this occurring in the difficult graphic novel chosen for Sabbah et al.'s study. Furthermore, Sabbah et al. suggested that their study be repeated with high school students and adults, to see if the results are consistent with their findings. Sabbah et al.'s study further shows the complexity of graphic novels, and that teaching the elements of design and graphic novel conventions could help develop the visual and multimodal literacies of all learners.

In my opinion, the students in Sabbah et al.'s study were at a disadvantage to comprehend the graphic novels since they had not received any specific instruction on how to read such books, and therefore may have been less prepared to analyse the combination of words and images. Connors (2012) suggested that it is essential for educators, when teaching graphic novels, to “construct a vocabulary that enables them [the students] to think and talk critically about multimodal texts” (p. 86)—this is what I have repeatedly referred to as the metalanguage of graphic novels. This finding has been corroborated by Pantaleo's research with graphic novels (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). My recommendation is to compare how well students comprehend graphic novels based on whether they have received explicit instruction about graphic novel vocabulary and the specialized process of reading them. As for whether graphic novels are particularly suited for struggling and reluctant readers, I think that is dependent not only on the complexity of the texts in question, but on the interest levels of the students reading them, as well as their familiarity with the conventions of multimodal texts.

## Using Graphic Novels to Engage All Learners

While there is a lack of primary research available showing definitive reading comprehension benefits attributable to reading graphic novels, there is a growing body of research suggesting that graphic novels can be successfully used to assist students who experience difficulty with literacy learning, as well as at-risk youth, with literacy engagement (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al., 2011). To reach all students we must refine our approach to meet their individual needs (DeBlase, 2005). Drawing upon the knowledge and experiences that they bring as individuals to the classroom is one way for us to increase student success (Boyd et al., 2006). It has been widely assumed that graphic novels are particularly well suited for use with reluctant and struggling readers (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al., 2011). Before making generalizations about the efficacy of using multimodal texts with the “not traditionally successful with literacy” demographic, I will focus in more detail on successful projects completed by educational researchers in this area of study.

One of the earliest uses of comics and graphic novels in education was to encourage students to read more (Duncan & Smith, 2009). I will focus on three primary research projects that have taken place in the past decade, in which educators used comics and graphic novels with reluctant readers: Bitz (2004); Frey and Fisher (2004); and Hughes et al. (2011). I have already described Bitz’s 2004 Comic Book Project, which was so successful that it was later turned into an educational book (2009).

In another study, Frey and Fisher (2004) found great success using graphic novels with high school students who had not experienced success in traditional literacy classrooms. By bringing graphic novels and other multimodal texts, such as movies and

online media, into a class of English language learners, they were able to encourage discussion, comprehension, and increased written output. According to Yang (2008), “By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read” (p. 187). In Frey and Fisher’s study, researchers initially read graphic novels with the students and discussed them. After discussions, students wrote responses to what they had read. After the introduction of these multimodal texts and discussions, students’ written responses showed a marked increase in including complex sentences and multiple ideas. In turn, meaningful discussion about a text can lead to increased comprehension (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003). It seems that using graphic novels both motivates students to discuss ideas more and in turn improves their oracy. Along with the added benefits gained through authentic discussion for student engagement and learning (Applebee, et al., 2003; Wegerif, 2005), incorporating collaborative talk (where students voice their opinions aloud, collectively sharing their ideas to make meaning and deepen their understanding) regarding multimodal texts can enhance student learning even more.

In addition to prompting discussions, graphic novels were further used in Frey and Fisher’s (2004) study as models for students to create their own multimodal artifacts. The students were very enthusiastic about creating their own texts, and their finished projects showed improvement in their creative writing abilities as evidenced by the inclusion of dialogue, longer sentences, and more complex word choice (Frey & Fisher, 2004). The researchers concluded that graphic novels have the power to inspire students to write creatively, as well as provide visual vocabulary for literary techniques such as dialogue, tone, and mood (Frey & Fisher, 2004). These popular texts served as a bridge

between out-of-school literacies and within-school literacies. It is through bringing out-of-school literacies into the classroom that we welcome our students to use skills they are confident with (Walsh, 2007). This confidence helps to build their connection to school in general, and creates a positive cycle of learning and literacy-building. Simon (2012) found that embracing students' out-of-school literacies helps them improve their in-school literacies. Graphic novels were one way to help students gain knowledge about the ways writers create meaning. Additionally, Frey and Fisher found that by teaching with multimodal texts they had helped their students become "more knowledgeable consumers of ideas and information" (p. 24). This was also found by Ajayi (2009) and Chun (2009), who determined that students showed increased critical thinking after having worked with multimodal texts.

Perhaps, in part, inspired by the trail-blazing work of Bitz (2004) as well as Frey and Fisher (2004), Hughes et al. (2011) also used graphic novels with marginalized youth. At the outset, Hughes et al. acknowledged that there is a lack of research on evaluating the impact of teaching multiliteracies in the school curriculum. Their research involved working with twelve adolescents in two different programs. The youths involved were 15 to 17 years old, and had not been successful in traditional English classes. One of the case studies was based on six male grade 11 students enrolled in a workplace preparation English class at a Toronto secondary school. This group spent six weeks reading two graphic novels: *Paul Has a Summer Job* (Rabagliati, 2003) and *Skim* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2008). The students finished the unit by creating their own short-form graphic novels, much like those produced in Frey and Fisher's (2004) study, and in the research projects of Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

In Hughes et al.'s (2011) second case study, they used multimodal texts with a mixed gender group at an alternative program for expelled high school students in Toronto. The students took part in a six-week media arts unit, covering the topics of visual literacy and the reading of several graphic novels. The students completed the unit by creating graphic (multimodal) narratives about challenges they had faced in the past, in particular the ones that had brought them to the alternative program.

Both groups of students in Hughes et al.'s (2011) two case studies described themselves as not being good at reading or writing. The students involved did not generally enjoy reading, and they had not been successful according to traditional measures of scholastic literacy. The intention of using graphic novels with these two groups was partly due to the visual appeal and accessible nature of the medium (Hughes et al.). Furthermore, graphic novels are a medium that many students have familiarity with outside of school (Connors, 2013), so bringing in these texts provides a high-interest link between in-school and out-of-school literacy practices (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al.; Thomas, 2011). Hughes et al. also subscribed to the belief that the images contained in graphic novels can help struggling readers comprehend the story, and that the reduced quantity of written text is less intimidating for students who have not been successful at reading text-only novels. This reasoning was very similar to the pedagogical rationale used by teachers of English language learners (Ajayi, 2009; Chun, 2009). Hughes et al. also set out with the intent to teach the skills of multiliteracies by using graphic novels as examples of multimodal texts.

In the workplace English class, Hughes et al. (2011) began the unit by exposing students to the elements that are commonly used in graphic novels, both visual and

textual. This process is similar to the work of Connors (2013), Dallacqua (2012), Hammond (2012), and Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). The educators adopted a literature circle approach, where students read the same novels independently, then met with the other students who were reading the same title to discuss aspects of the texts. Since graphic novels are virtually impossible to read aloud (without the use of a document camera, or similar image-projecting device), Hughes et al. noted that it was challenging to have all members of the group at comparable points in the book, particularly when dealing with a group of students with a wide range of reading abilities. This compromised the value of the literature circle approach, since students could not often find common points of reference to discuss the elements, themes and plot points. In order to avoid this problem with the alternative program group, Hughes et al. had the students select from a variety of graphic novels and they each read independently. After students had read several different graphic novels they were then able to find examples of different textual and visual elements, such as panel types, captions, word balloons, and point of view. These common elements and visual features were then drawn upon as examples during whole-class discussion. Although students were reluctant readers, they found the use of graphic novels a pleasurable literacy experience and the books were found to hold visual appeal for readers at all ability levels (Hughes et al.).

Hughes et al. (2011) had students create their own sequential art narratives (short graphic novels) as a culminating activity. This was partly based on the New London Group's (1996) framework of multiliteracies, which suggested that students must become competent producers of multimodal texts. Moreover, student-composed graphic novels are thought of as a *turn-around pedagogy*, and are used with students at risk in Australia

to assist disenfranchised youths with literacy learning by giving them a non-traditional way to express themselves (Comber & Kamler, 2005). Students are often motivated by writing tasks that involve a meaningful connection to their lives, so creating *autographics* (autobiographic multimodal works) is one way to achieve this (Whitlock, 2006). Hughes et al. found that the students were engaged by the fact that the subjects of their narratives would be moments from their own lives. The writing process included doing group brainstorming, sketching and writing, as well as using laptops with the animation program, ComicLife. A guest author (of one of the graphic novels provided) was brought in to teach students how to tell their stories using the combination of images and text. In the alternative program case study, ten of the twelve students involved completed their own short graphic novels. Hughes et al. observed multiple literacy skills at work as the students worked on their products. Students' graphic narratives showed evidence of different visual elements, such as point of view; varied angles of perspective; shot distances ranging from long, establishing shots to extreme close-ups; diversity of layout and paneling; contrast and juxtaposition; as well as a range of literary devices.

The two case studies conducted by Hughes et al. (2011) supported the idea that graphic novels are useful in helping teach literacy skills to reluctant readers and at-risk students, while at the same time acting as a resource for teaching multimodal literacy skills. Some of the students from both groups showed improvement in their abilities to visualize and make connections—two valuable reading comprehension strategies. Hughes and her co-researchers suggested that inferencing skills may be improved by students reading graphic novels, as readers are constantly required to make inferences as to what occurred between adjacent panels. Until there is a separate study, this specific

finding may be viewed as a reasonable assumption that is not yet definitively supported by research. Additionally, Hughes et al. found that students were highly motivated and engaged by the process of designing and creating their own graphic narratives. This is consistent with the findings of Bitz (2004), Frey and Fisher (2004) and Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). Graphic novels show great promise as a medium for teaching multiple literacy outcomes to a diverse range of students. In addition to being used with readers who have not formerly experienced success with traditional literacy outcomes, graphic novels have been widely heralded as a useful teaching tool for English language learners. I will now investigate whether there is sufficient research evidence to back up these claims.

### **Using Graphic Novels with English Language Learners**

Several scholars have suggested that graphic novels can be used to support the literacy learning of English language learners (Bakis, 2012; Carter, 2007; Gavigan & Tomasevich, 2011; Gorman, 2003; Gravett, 2005; Monnin, 2010; Versaci, 2007; Weiner, 2004; Wolk, 2007). As there is a lack of primary research in this area, it will be of value to look more closely at the findings of three different research studies involving the use of multimodal texts with English language learners.

Ajayi (2009); Chun (2009); and Farrell, Arizpe, and McAdam (2010) used multimodal texts with their international students, with successful results. Ajayi used advertising as a form of multimodal text and Farrell et al. used a wordless picturebook, *The Arrival* (Tan, 2007) as their focus. Of these three studies, Chun's (2009) pilot project with an ELL class, using the highly-acclaimed graphic novel *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986)

most closely aligns with the research questions I am pursuing, because he used a graphic novel at the high school level. One component of Chun's teaching resource was a list of "Intellectually Substantive Graphic Novels" to use with high school students. Most of the graphic novels recommended are nonfiction, first-person accounts of various international conflicts, such as *Palestine* (Sacco, 2001), *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq* (Stamaty, 2004), *The Complete Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2007), and *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* (Sacco, 2000). Although he did not explicitly express his criteria for selection, his article valued the importance of bringing in "alternative representations of history" (Chun, 2009, p. 149), as well as exploring themes of "militarism, revolution, and human rights" (ibid., p. 149). My criteria for selecting graphic novels that are well-suited for use in high school contains a variety of components: strong narrative voice (or engaging plot); artistic value (clear images, displaying a variety of the conventions of the form); social, cultural, or historical themes (with relevance to the teen experience, or the curriculum); and/or is set in a non-western location. There are many interesting and thought-provoking graphic novels that meet the aforementioned criteria (see Appendix C). With specific regard to English language learners, who are often international students, it is important to include works that originate from different cultures as one way to show the value of diverse viewpoints and cultures. Of course, it is essential to find a book that is suited to the student who will be reading it. For example, in my Communications 12 class I had eight international students from China. They greatly appreciated the fact that I brought in copies of *Boxers* (Yang, 2013), which deals with themes from the Boxer Rebellion in China. If my students were from Latin America I would not have suggested they read the same title, as

they would lack the necessary cultural and historical background to comprehend many aspects of the book. I cannot stress highly enough how important it is to find graphic novels that interest the students, in order to have the highest potential for engagement.

Another benefit of using graphic novels is that the visual information they convey can effectively express physical description in a way that is often superior to text-based readings (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). This allows students to vividly picture the places they are reading about. Reading about different cultures in graphic format provides a gateway into comparing different cultures, as the students view what they are reading with critical eyes. Since students need to be engaged with the texts they are reading in order to fully comprehend them (Frey & Fisher, 2010), when students read compelling narratives that have relevance to their lives, their engagement and comprehension are both maximized. According to an international study conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2004, the engagement of students' reading was more important than socioeconomic background in literacy performance. When students can relate to what they are reading and find it interesting, they gain more understanding. It has also been shown that reading can allow access to different social groups (Gee, 2008). When students read and discuss books, they make new connections with peers that allow them to break out of social hierarchies (Gee). As well, the New London Group's pedagogy of multiliteracies (1996) in which learners are viewed as bringing a variety of literacies to the classroom, is in alignment with using international graphic novels with English language learners: students will see that the literacies and background knowledge they bring to the classroom are valued, and they can use these and expand on these literacies as competent consumers, designers and users of language.

By including graphic novels from a variety of cultures, we value different voices, expose students to a range of worldviews, and develop global citizens (Hadaway, 2011). In addition, culturally-situated graphic novels “provide a way for youths to negotiate alternate identities” (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006, p. 42) while making connections to their own lives (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004). The alternate identities that Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila referred to were ways in which students can reconcile their out-of-school personas (which include their linguistic, cultural, sexual, gender, and socioeconomic identities) with the in-school, academic aspects of their personalities. Some students have more congruence between these multiple sides of themselves, while others might find it more of a challenge to incorporate their non-scholastic aspects in the school environment. Without a bridge between these different sides, some students could feel as though the learning they are doing in school has little to no bearing on their “real world” lives.

Chun (2009) chose to use *Maus* with his ELL class, in part because it addressed the theme of racism—something that many international students may have experienced. The Pulitzer Prize winning biography had the added benefit of serving as an exemplar for students when they were creating their own mini biographies. The challenging historical issues raised about the Holocaust in *Maus* also provide thought-provoking prompts for class discussions. Reading narratives in graphic novel format requires and reinforces a stance of critical inquiry (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Avila, 2006). Chun included Readers’ Theatre as an aspect of his pilot project teaching *Maus*, in order to help students inhabit the characters and more deeply engage with their struggles. The following paragraph

provides an abbreviated outline of what Chun and his teaching partner did during their *Maus* pilot project.

The students involved in Chun's (2009) study were ELL students in grades 9 to 12, many of whom were international immigrants. The teachers (Chun and his colleague, M. Atwell) first surveyed the reading habits of the students. Before reading *Maus*, some historical background context and common vocabulary were provided. There were also basic instructions given on how to read comics and graphic novels. During Chun's unit, the students read *Maus* enthusiastically, and asked many questions. The teacher, at times, read aloud as students followed along in their books. There were discussions about non-standard usage of English, as was shown through the speaking styles of different characters in the book. This diversity of voices was valued, and students were welcomed to share their own stories. The culminating project involved students creating multimodal representations of their own family narratives. In conclusion, Chun (2009) found that reading compelling narratives such as *Maus* gave students "a sense of ownership over these texts through their intellectual and emotional engagement with them" (p. 152).

Another educator who brought multimodal texts into the ELL classroom was Ajayi (2009). One of Ajayi's research questions was to find out what literacy practices are acquired by English language learners as they work with multimodal texts. The class for the study consisted of 18 grade 7 students (6 male, 12 female), predominantly from Latin America. The phases of the study included a pre-teaching activity in which the educators discussed background knowledge of multimodal texts (in this case, advertising). Over the course of several classes the students looked at, analysed and discussed advertisements, then created their own multimodal ads. The students described

their ads in a minimum of five sentences and eventually presented their work to their peers. The audience members participated by commenting on the ads and questioning the presenters. Data collected during Ajayi's study included the multimodal artifacts (advertisements), transcribed oral explanations, the teacher's feedback, whole-class discussions, and post-unit interviews with the participants.

Ajayi (2009) found that using multimodal texts with English language learners "enhanced language and literacy learning in a way that was transformative and affected their identities" (p. 594). Two other findings were that using multimodal models provided students new ways of entry into creating compositions; and that analyzing, discussing and creating multimodal texts fostered critical literacy practices (Ajayi). One of the advantages that Ajayi found when using multimodal texts with ELLs, is that the message is conveyed in multiple ways, transcending English language alone. English language learners can make use of other cues, such as image, layout, and graphics to help them establish context and comprehend the text. These are similar to some of the elements used in studying graphic novels, which shows how there can be transfer between studying different multimodal texts. Ajayi suggested that multimodal texts are a way to "motivate, excite, and engage all learners" (p. 594). These texts more closely resemble the types of texts adolescents identify with in navigating the online world as well as other modern media. Additionally, multimodal texts are well-suited to teaching critical thinking (Ajayi). Frey and Fisher (2004) found that students were able to use a critical stance more easily after working with graphic novels, and Pantaleo (2011) found that graphic novels are a valuable tool for teachers wanting to promote critical thinking through discussion. The findings of Chun (2009) and Ajayi align with those of Frey and

Fisher (2004), with regard to the inclusion of multimodal texts showing a positive impact on students' language acquisition and development.

Another example of researchers investigating how English language learners work with multimodal texts is a study by Farrell, Arizpe, and McAdam (2010), who used Shaun Tan's graphic book *The Arrival* (2006) with immigrant children. Students were given sections of the wordless graphic novel to annotate with captions, speech bubbles, thought bubbles, and questions to the characters or author. The purpose of the study was to see how children are able to gain meaning from visual images in narrative stories. The researchers acknowledged that picturebooks are now recognized as sophisticated texts, which allow students to utilize visual and textual literacy skills, as well as engage creativity and meaningful discussion (Farrell et al.). Furthermore, Farrell et al. found that the students used many elements to decipher meaning, including layout, perspective and colour. Consistent with Pantaleo's findings (2012), Farrell et al. suggested that if the students had been given specific instruction in these elements, the participants would have been better equipped to comprehend the visual texts, and would have been well served by possessing a common language to discuss specific aspects of what they had seen. This has been shown to be effective in aforementioned studies (Chun, 2009; Connors, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Hughes et al., 2011; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b). In a similar vein, after his study, Ajayi (2009) suggested, in alignment with the theoretical ideas put forth by the New London Group (1996), that it is essential to develop a multiliteracies "tool kit" in order to help educators teach a common metalanguage and design grammar (clearly explaining the elements and conventions of graphic novels) when discussing the use of these types of texts. Educators who have

taken the time to develop tool kits, such as those previously mentioned, have experienced great success when they have explicitly shared this metalanguage with their students.

Perhaps it is time for a *new* New London Group to meet and develop some concrete guidelines around developing a practical metalanguage for discussing multimodal texts.

## **Conclusion**

Graphic novels are multimodal texts that are well-suited to a variety of literacy learning opportunities in the high school English classroom. To incorporate aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) and bridge the gap between in and out of school literacies, graphic novel book clubs have been successfully implemented by several educators (Connors, 2013; Hammond, 2012; Sabeti, 2013; Dallacqua, 2012). Bringing these multimodal texts into the classroom is one way to meet the inspiring call put forward by the New London Group (1996). Educational researchers such as Pantaleo (2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b) have done this with resounding success, particularly after teaching a common metalanguage to facilitate discussion and interpretation (and later incorporation) of the elements that comprise graphic novels. However, according to the current research, it is still unclear as to the ways that reading graphic novels can affect reading comprehension (Norman, 2012; Sabbah et al., 2013). It is possible that reading graphic novels leads to improved comprehension for some individuals (Sabbah et al.) though it has also been shown that reading nonfiction texts with accompanying visuals does not positively impact reading comprehension (Norman). In my observations, at the very least, many reluctant readers engage with and enjoy reading graphic novels, which, if nothing else, has a positive impact on their attitudes towards reading.

Of the existing research on the use of graphic novels, perhaps the most encouraging is the way they have been shown to engage all learners—including students who have not typically been successful in achieving literacy outcomes (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2004; Hughes et al., 2011). In the pioneering work of Bitz's Comic Book Club, students who had faced challenges in their acquisition of literacy skills showed positive learning through the creation of their own comic books. Frey and Fisher also experienced much success in their use of graphic novels (and other multimodal texts) with academically marginalized students in a California high school. The two groups that Hughes et al. worked with in Toronto (one an alternative program for expelled youth, and the other in a workplace preparation English class) were very motivated by the reading and creation of graphic novels.

Using multimodal texts with English language learners was shown to be worthwhile by both Ajayi (2009) and Chun (2009). These researchers found their students were engaged and eager to read and discuss the meanings conveyed by the texts. Chun discovered an increase in the level of class discussion about the graphic novels they were reading, and that there was a resulting positive impact on critical thinking. Ajayi found that reading and creating multimodal texts inspired his students to be more successful in critical literacy outcomes. Working with immigrant English language learners, Farrell et al. found that using visual texts allowed students to develop their visual literacy skills and discuss interpretations with each other (2010).

There are many valuable reasons to bring graphic novels into the secondary English classroom, as evidenced by the aforementioned research. Graphic novels are an excellent print-based way to branch into the new era of multiliteracies and

multimodalities as put forward in the New London Group's "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" (1996). Additionally, to show value for and strengthen students' awareness of aesthetic reading (a la Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory, 1978), graphic novels are an exceptionally adept tool. Personally, I have been pleased by how positively my English classes respond to reading graphic novels as part of their coursework. Having read the supporting research, I now have even more ideas as to how I can utilize these multimodal texts to support literacy learning in my secondary English classroom.

## Chapter 3 – Implications for Teaching

### Summary of Key Articles

During my research into ways to use graphic novels for literacy learning in high school English, there were three articles that stood out as being particularly innovative and inspiring for classroom application: Connors' (2013) "Weaving multimodal meaning in a graphic novel reading group," Pantaleo's (2012) "Middle-school students reading and creating multimodal texts: A case study," and Hughes et al.'s (2011) "Adolescents and 'autographics': Reading and writing coming-of-age graphic novels." To assist those who would like the executive summary, in order to focus their own foray into graphic novels, I have provided a brief annotation for each of these peer-reviewed articles.

**"Weaving multimodal meaning in a graphic novel reading group."** Connors (2013) set out to discover how students read and comprehend graphic novels in a true-to-life setting. To do this he created an out-of-school graphic novel book club. During interviews with the group and with individuals, Connors observed that students were using many different semiotic resources to make meaning from the multimodal texts. He surmised that graphic novels provide a valuable way to develop visual analysis and critical literacies, as well as provide a vehicle to showcase the diverse literacies that students bring to the classroom.

**"Middle-school students reading and creating multimodal texts: A case study."** Pantaleo's (2012) research conducted with middle-school students was a rigorous

qualitative inquiry into how teachers can best teach the literary and visual elements of graphic novels, and how the students assimilate these concepts while reading and creating multimodal texts. Pantaleo found that by teaching a common metalanguage of visual elements and conventions of graphic novels (i.e. panelling, layout, perspective, etc.), students were more readily able to discuss the texts and then apply those elements and conventions in the creation of their own mini graphic novels. Pantaleo's (2012) research aligns with the findings of Connors (2013), in suggesting that there are many cognitive skills involved in students making meaning of the combination of text and visuals in graphic novels.

**“Adolescents and ‘autographics’: Reading and writing coming-of-age graphic novels.”** Hughes et al. (2011) showcased the ways that graphic novels can be used with marginalized students who have not previously experienced success with literacy learning. Both of Hughes et al.'s case studies included students who did not enjoy reading, and were not academically motivated. Following the lead of Australian educators who have used graphic novel creation with at-risk youth (Comber & Kamler, 2005), Hughes et al. found that their students were highly motivated and engaged by the process of creating their own “autographics.” Hughes et al. suggested that students who read and created graphic novels showed improved abilities to visualize and make connections. The discussions that were prompted while reading the books were also a way to develop speaking and listening literacies.

### **Implications for Pedagogy**

It was valuable for my own practice to look deeply into the literature to find the ways in which graphic novels can be used to support literacy learning, particularly in the context of high school English. The growing body of research suggested several key ways that educators at the secondary level can use graphic novels in their schools. Starting with an approach taken by Connors (2013), and in alignment with Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory (1978), creating a graphic novel book club is one way to introduce these multimodal texts to students. Book clubs typically involve from five to twelve students, and therefore require a smaller investment of materials (compared to buying entire class sets of books) and the book club model has proven to be an effective method of valuing the out-of-school literacies (New London Group, 1996) that students bring to school. Holding a six-week book club using graphic novels would be an excellent way for teachers new to graphic novels to become familiar with the elements and conventions. The book club format also keeps the number of participants to a manageably small number, which would more easily allow the teacher to work one-on-one and observe potential challenges that arise. The voluntary, small group aspect of the book club would also shift the focus onto enjoyment (aesthetic reading) rather than high-pressure pedagogy and assessment.

A second, perhaps more structured, way for teachers to use graphic novels in high school English class is to teach a graphic novels unit. This has been successfully implemented by several educational researchers (Chun, 2009; Dallacqua, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Hughes et al., 2011; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and I have taken this approach myself. By bringing graphic novels into the classroom teachers show a valuing of multimodal texts. As part of the unit, it is crucial to teach the metalanguage

of graphic texts, which would then be available as a communication tool as students read, discuss, critique and create their own multimodal works. One particularly helpful text for this purpose is McCloud's *Making Comics* (2006). Various researchers have shown that these are texts that are suitable for all learners (Chun, 2009, Connors, 2013, Hammond, 2012; Hughes et al., 2011); therefore, teaching a graphic novel unit in English class is an innovative way to encompass a variety of literacy learning objectives, including visual, multimodal, and critical literacies, as well as encouraging reading, speaking, listening, writing and representing.

In alternate education programs, for at-risk or marginalized youth, graphic novels could be brought in to increase engagement and foster creative self-expression (Comber & Kamler, 2005; Hughes et al., 2011). Bringing in media that more closely resemble students' real world texts is a way to show the relevance of learning multiple literacies in school (Frey & Fisher, 2004; New London Group, 1996). By creating comics and graphic narratives based on their own experiences, students feel empowered to express their voices while refining new tools for creative expression (Bitz, 2004; Frey & Fisher; Hughes et al.; Pantaleo, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

In synthesizing the findings of the existing research, I propose that graphic novels have the potential to encourage cross-cultural discourse in schools. Through the use of visual imagery, a large quantity of information can be efficiently conveyed via the graphic novel medium. While reading international graphic novels, when students view the settings, as well as the emotions communicated by the facial expressions of the characters, they become virtually immersed in various world cultures. Reading a variety of international graphic novels is a way to bring students into contact with a diversity of

people, places, and cultures without leaving the classroom, and has the potential to start dialogue, build bridges of cross-cultural understanding, and promote student engagement with global issues. Graphic novels could become a valuable tool for teaching cultural literacy. There is also the potential for co-teaching: English teachers could team up with social studies and history teachers at their schools to offer students a selection of reading materials (in translation) from the regions and cultures that they are studying in their humanities courses. Through teacher collaboration on some units, students will be reading material that has relevance to them, as well as holding their interest (aesthetically and emotionally) in a way that cannot be achieved through the efferent reading of textbooks.

There are also other potential uses for graphic novels in facilitating cross-curricular instruction. English teachers could team up with Fine Arts educators to help students create their own graphic novels: the brainstorming, writing, storyboarding and editing could be done in English class; while the sketching, layout, lettering, inking, colouring, and binding could be completed in Art class. Expanding on this, content area teachers could become involved in the process to help students infuse their books with relevant curricular content. Further applications could involve Leadership (or Civics) in organizing a book fair showcasing student-generated graphic novels. To promote their works, students could learn specialized techniques (Business class) and practice their public speaking (Leadership). Alternately, a number of student-created comics could be compiled into one volume, which could then be sold as a fundraiser or as a keepsake showcasing the value of self-publishing. Additionally, Information Technology teachers could get involved with English teachers in helping students create digital comics, or

online multimodal artifacts. In these ways, the study and creation of graphic novels expands out from the English classroom into the school community, the digital landscape, and the world at large.

Finally, graphic novels are well-suited for use in media studies units, due to their multimodal nature. Ajayi (2009) found that by analyzing multimodal texts, students were better-able to critically view and create their own multimodal media advertisements. Since we live in a world that is filled with consumer advertising, it is a valuable literacy skill to equip students with an awareness of the elements of visual design and persuasive techniques (New London Group, 1996). Students could create multimodal public service ads, raising awareness about causes they feel passionate about. Being able to create, remix, and manipulate digital multimedia, as well as acquiring competence in digital literacy, are highly valued skills in this modern age. These are some of the multiliteracies that allow students to become adept consumers, critics and creators of new media (New London Group).

Building on the ideas put forward in the literature, there are numerous ways for educators to harness the multimodal power of graphic novels in their classrooms. These books are widely available and ready to be put to use in high school English classrooms. All it takes is a teacher who is willing to step out of the comfort zone of text-only novels to gain a familiarity with the medium of graphic novels. Because there are a wide variety of titles available on an assortment of topics, teachers should be able to find one or several that appeal to their students. Students might already be familiar with reading comics and graphic novels outside of school, and seeing that the teacher validates this form of reading could be a way to engage students in classroom literacy practices and

build relationships at the same time. The fact that not all teachers are familiar with the graphic novel format should not be seen as a deterrent: allowing students to share their expertise is one way for the teacher to surrender the need to be the authoritative expert and shift into a space where knowledge and learning can be generated by the collective group. I admit that I was a bit nervous the first time I taught a graphic novel unit.

However, the overwhelmingly positive reaction of the students proved to me that taking a chance on something new had been a wise decision. I encourage teachers to take small risks in their pedagogy, to reinvigorate their practice with something they have never tried before: bringing graphic novels into the classroom is one sure-fire way to do this.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Considering the fact that many books have been written about ways to use graphic novels for educational purposes, there should be a large body of research to support these practices. Unfortunately, there are many areas that require further research. In my exploration of the literature I was hard-pressed to find rigorous studies using graphic novels at the high school level.

I suggest that there should be studies that investigate how students read graphic novels in informal settings (i.e. out of school book clubs, or during leisure time) compared to how students read them in scholastic settings. As some educators are taking a less-formal, book club approach, it might be valuable to look at the pedagogical implications of how we teach graphic novels. This leads to the larger question as to whether graphic novels are best “taught” informally (strictly aesthetically) or whether

they can still offer valuable literacy learning when brought into more structured, academic settings.

How the reading of graphic novels impacts reading comprehension is another area that demands further research. There are multiple areas to explore: How does reading graphic novels impact students' abilities to comprehend plain text novels? And how can we aid students in their reading comprehension of graphic novels? Studies into the effect of graphic novels on reading comprehension should be conducted with a variety of groups, such as learners of various ages, people at different stages of language acquisition, students who have not been successful in traditional literacies, as well as adult literacy learners. Further research could look into the potential for graphic novels as a tool to improve reading comprehension, to see if there is a correlation between the ability to "read visuals" and understand graphic novels, and whether that positively correlates with increased reading comprehension of monomodal texts.

Hughes et al., 2011 suggested that reading graphic novels promotes the ability to make inferences. A study could look at the impact that reading graphic novels has on students' abilities to make inferences.

People have suggested to me that graphic novels are well-suited for English language learners. There needs to be more research conducted into how English language learners respond to, process, and interact with multimodal texts. One way to do this would be to use the same novel in different formats (one graphic version, the other print-text only) and then assess the participants on their level of comprehension. Additionally, tests could be conducted to see what level of visual complexity (as well as the ratio of text-to-visual images) is most appropriate in graphic novels to be utilized for various

stages of English language acquisition. One basic way to do this would be to have students read visually-complex graphic novels compared to visually-simplified graphic novels to see the effect each had on reading comprehension. Further research could add validity and clarity to the widespread, anecdotal claims that graphic novels are helpful in teaching many literacy outcomes to a variety of learners.

### **Final Thoughts**

Ultimately, it is theory that drives research, and research determines which practices will become established pedagogy. New theories can inspire educational research to take new directions. With the utmost respect to the New London Group (1996), as their meetings and subsequent publications have provided inspiration for researchers and educators for nearly two decades, I think it is time for an updated “Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.” It has now been almost twenty years since the publication of their foundational paper, and the world we currently live in has evolved in ways that the New London Group could only hint at: in 1996 the world of mobile devices was limited to bulky cell phones that did not access the Internet. When the New London Group held their meeting of the minds, there were no smart phones, digital tablets, nor omnipresent text messaging, and near-incessant electronic communication. Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, have influenced society and the means of communication in ways that the New London Group could never have predicted. With recording devices (audio, still pictures, and video) available on every cell phone, students today have readily-available tools to record, re-mix, create and share multimodal texts anywhere, at any time. As educators, we need to embrace the power of

these technological tools. We must keep our literacies up to date, in order to help students become adept at critically consuming, creating and communicating in this media saturated modern world.

In my opinion, the time has come for a new generation of educational theorists and researchers to work together with established experts in a variety of fields. This new group should take the time to develop and build upon the ideas put forward by the New London Group. The theories put forth in “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” (1996) illuminated the way: Now it is time for us to help our students make their own way down that path and, in the process, design a social future that will become the road of their reality.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Suggestions for Starting to Teach with Graphic Novels

#### 1. Know your students

If you have an understanding of what your students are interested in, you can more easily find graphic novel titles that they will find engaging.

#### 2. Find Appropriate Resources

Look online, go to book stores, and speak to your local librarian (school and public library) about titles that might be suitable for your students.

YALSA (a branch of the American Library Association) creates an annual list of graphic novels that are suited for teens: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/great-graphic-novels>

Check out some of the professional resource books to get ideas for ways to use graphic novels with your students (see Appendix B).

Start reading graphic novels yourself. Until you've familiarized yourself with the medium, it will be challenging for you to teach the graphic novel elements and conventions. To start with, look for the five titles I've recommended (see Appendix C – titles marked with a "+") for teachers who are new to graphic novels.

#### 3. Include Colleagues

Talk to your coworkers, within the English department, as well as teachers in other curricular areas. Perhaps someone you work with is already using graphic novels. You could do some co-planning together, or potentially co-teach a unit.

#### 4. Start Small

Start a lunch hour book club. Once you have a few copies (in your school library, or signed out from the public library) you can invite students to come and read and discuss graphic novels. This is a way for you to learn firsthand about how students react to them.

Include one graphic novel as an option when you do literature circles (in-class book clubs) with your class. Make sure the students understand that the graphic novel title is an equally valid choice as the other novel selections.

#### 5. Teach Graphic Novel Elements Explicitly

Ensuring that there is a common understanding of the elements and metalanguage of graphic novels is crucial for students to be able to fully appreciate, analyze, and discuss

the complexities this medium. Knowledge of the elements that go into making graphic novels will also help students when they go on to create their own multimodal texts.

### **6. Share Your Experiences**

Give a five-minute presentation at your next English department meeting, or talk during the professional development portion of a staff meeting. You could also email your staff to invite them to come see your graphic novel collection, and share with them the ways you've used them with your students.

## Appendix B

### Resource Books for Teaching Graphic Novels

- Bakis, M. (2012). *The graphic novel classroom: Powerful teaching and learning with images*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bitz, M. (2009). *Manga high: Literacy, identity, and coming of age in an urban high school*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Carter, J. B. (2007). *Building literacy connections with graphic novels: Page by page, panel by panel*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gavigan, K. W., & Tomasevich, M. (2011). *Connecting comics to curriculum: Strategies for grades 6-12*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.
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- Wolk, D. (2007). *Reading comics: How graphic novels work and what they mean*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

## Appendix C

### Graphic Novels Recommended for Use in High School English Classes

Note: All titles should be carefully previewed in advance, to see if they are suitable for use with the specific individuals who make up that particular class. Several of these titles contain mature content that could upset sensitive students.

\*=*might not be suitable for all readers*

+=*good choice for a teacher new to the medium of graphic novels*

Aboutet, M., & Oubrerie, C. (2012). *Aya: life in Yop City*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Brown, C. (2006). *Louis Riel*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Byrne, E., & Gurr, S. (2013). *Darwin: a graphic biography*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.

Castellucci, C., & Rugg, J. (2007). *The plain Janes*. New York, NY: Minx.

Delisle, G. (2000). *Shenzhen: a travelogue from China*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Delisle, G. (2006). *Pyongyang: a journey in North Korea*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Delisle, G. (2008). *Burma chronicles*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Delisle, G. (2012). *Jerusalem: chronicles from the holy city*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

\*Eisner, W. (1978). *A contract with God*. New York, NY: DC Comics.

Geary, R. (2009). *Trotsky: a graphic biography*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang.

Hamilton, T. (2009). *Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451: the authorized adaptation*. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.

+Hicks, F.E. (2012). *Friends with boys*. New York, NY: First Second.

- Jablonski, C., & Purvis, L. (2010). *Resistance*. New York, NY: First Second.
- \*Johnson, R.K. (2005). *Night fisher*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.
- \*Kirkman, R., & Moore, T. (2006). *The walking dead, vol. 01: Days gone bye*. Berkeley, CA: Image Comics.
- L'Engle, M., & Larson, H. (2012). *A wrinkle in time: the graphic novel*. New York, NY: Margaret Ferguson Books.
- Lewis, J., Aydin, A., & Powell, N. (2013). *March: Book 1*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- +Larson, H. (2010). *Mercury*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books.
- \*Lockpez, I., Haspiel, D., & Villarrubia, J. (2010). *Cuba: my revolution*. New York, NY: Vertigo.
- Lutes, J., & Bertozzi, N. (2007). *Houdini: the handcuff king*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- \*Lutes, J. (2008). *Berlin: city of stones, book 1*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.
- \*McKay, S., & Lafrance, D. (2013). *War brothers: the graphic novel*. Toronto, ON: Annick Press.
- \*Modan, R. (2007). *Exit wounds*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.
- \*Moore, A. (1995). *Watchmen*. New York, NY: DC Comics.
- \*Moore, A., & Lloyd, D. (2008). *V for vendetta*. New York, NY: Vertigo.
- \*Muchamore, R., & Aggs, J. (2012). *The recruit: the graphic novel*. London, UK: Hodder Children's Books.
- Musashi, M., & Wilson, S. M. (2012). *The book of five rings: a graphic novel*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.
- Nakazawa, K. (2004). *Barefoot Gen: a cartoon story of Hiroshima*. San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp Publishing.
- Neri, G., & DuBurke, R. (2010). *Yummy: the last days of a Southside shorty*. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books.

- O'Malley, B.L. (2004). *Scott Pilgrim's precious little life*. Portland, OR: Oni Press.
- Pacinotti, G. (2007). *Garage band*. New York, NY: First Second.
- Rabagliati, M. (2005). *Paul moves out*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.
- \*Sacco, J. (2009). *Footnotes in Gaza*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Books.
- \*Sacco, J., & Said, E. W. (2001). *Palestine*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.
- +Satrapi, M. (2003). *Persepolis*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- \*Satrapi, M. (2005). *Persepolis 2*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Shakespeare, W., & Hoshine, K. (2008). *Macbeth: No Fear Shakespeare graphic novel*. New York, NY: SparkNotes Publishing.
- Small, D. (2009). *Stitches: a memoir*. Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.
- Sowa, M., & Savoia, S. (2011). *Marzi: a memoir*. New York, NY: Vertigo.
- +Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus: a survivor's tale*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Spiegelman, A. (1992). *Maus II: and here my troubles began*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Tamaki, M., & Tamaki, J. (2010). *Skim*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books.
- Tan, S. (2007). *The arrival*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine Books.
- \*Thompson, C. (2003). *Blankets*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- \*Thompson, C. (2011). *Habibi*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- \*Vaughan, B. K., Henrichon, N., & Klein, T. (2006). *Pride of Baghdad*. New York, NY: DC Comics.
- Westerfield, S., & Grayson, S., & Cummings, S. (2012). *Uglies: graphic novel #1*. New York, NY: Del Rey.
- Winick, J. (2000). *Pedro and me*. New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company.
- Yahgulanaas, M. N. (2010). *Red: a Haida manga*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre.

\*Yakin, B., & Bertozzi, N. (2013). *Jerusalem: a family portrait*. New York, NY: First Second.

+Yang, G. L. (2006). *American born Chinese*. New York, NY: First Second.

Yang, G. L. (2013). *Boxers*. New York, NY: First Second.

Yang, G. L. (2013). *Saints*. New York, NY: First Second.

## Appendix D

### For Further Reading

Graphic novels of note: to be read for deepening an understanding of the medium, or for teachers of adult students.

*Warning: these books contain mature content, some of which is suitable only for people over the age of 18.*

Auster, P., Karasik, P., & Mazzucchelli, D. (2004). *City of glass: the graphic novel*. New York, NY: Picador.

Ba, G., & Moon, F. (2011). *Daytripper*. New York, NY: Vertigo.

Bechdel, A. (2007). *Fun home: a family tragicomic*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Brown, C. (2004). *I never liked you*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.

Chwast, S. (2010). *Dante's divine comedy*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury.

Doxiadis, A., & Papadimitriou, C.H. (2009). *Logicomix: an epic search for truth*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Forney, E. (2012). *Marbles: mania, depression, Michelangelo, and me: a graphic memoir*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.

Ginsberg, A. & Drooker, E. (2010). *Howl: a graphic novel*. New York, NY: HarperPerennial.

Kick, R. (Ed.). (2013). *The graphic canon*. (Vols. 1-3). New York, NY: Seven Stories Press.

Lust, U. (2013). *Today is the last day of the rest of your life*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books.

Maroh, J. (2013). *Blue is the warmest color*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press.

O'Malley, B.L. (2014). *Seconds*. Toronto, ON: Random House Canada.

- Pekar, H., & Piskor, E. (2009). *The beats: a graphic history*. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Pond, M. (2014). *Over easy*. Montreal, QC: Drawn & Quarterly.
- Robinson, A. (2008). *Too cool to be forgotten*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions.
- Satrapa, M. (2006). *Chicken with plums*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Tezuka, O. (2003). *Buddha*. (Vols. 1-8). New York, NY: Vertical.
- Vaughan, B., Guerra, P., & Marzan, J. (2003). *Y: The last man*. (Vols. 1-10). New York, NY: Vertigo.
- Vaughan, B., & Staples, F. (2012). *Saga*. Berkeley, CA: Image Comics.
- Wood, B., & Kelly, R. (2008). *Local*. Portland, OR: Oni Press.
- Wood, B., & Kelly, R. (2011). *The New York five*. New York, NY: Vertigo.