

Multimodal History Instruction: Expanding the Use and Application of Comic Books and Graphic Novels across the Curriculum

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Abstract

Use of visual imagery in teaching history is as old as the subject itself. The current form of history education in US schools is the result of institutional pressures that have come to bear on schools over the years. Add to this the current testing frenzy and the information that many students glean from their classes may be questioned if it does not align with what the test is going to address in some way. We argue that history teachers should consider the use of comic books and graphic novels as a feature of their own instructional pedagogy. These two different mediums bring with them a rich and varied storyline that is almost a sheer visual experience. Utilizing non-fiction historical topics as part of the curriculum, teachers have the ability to introduce at the beginner level or go into an in-depth discussion of the dimensions of art or medium itself.

Keywords: comic books, graphic novels, pedagogy, literacy, history education

Introduction

In an academic discipline as broad as history, teachers are continuously searching for the kinds of materials that will facilitate a better connection between the student and the discipline content. As both a student and a teacher, we have memories of those social studies or history classes that were memorable, meaningful and engaging, and we also remember those classes that just “flopped.” To be sure, there were times when even an excellent teacher probably just did not have the fuel or experience to make 4th grade Indiana history or 8th grade Oklahoma history the rapturous experience that every student wishes for. There are certainly times when the personality of the teacher carries more than should be required for students to engage the content. The nature of effective pedagogy means that what a teacher presents to their students should constitute part of a multimodal experience (Bahl, 2015; Burger, 2017; Dickinson and Werner, 2015). By its very nature, multimodal refers to learning that touches and challenges the senses of the students. Students frequently see particular subjects as a block of knowledge that they have to memorize, rather than as something that is experiential. When teachers, through their pedagogy, reconceive of these topics in terms of experiential curriculum, they may imbue them with an inviting aesthetic. This aesthetic may be musical, visual, spoken word, or any other form of fabric that the educator imagines there to be. As Pinar (1995) reminds us, the aesthetic that guides the selection and use of text also greatly influences its very construction. This paper will argue that when teachers incorporate resources such as comic books and graphic novels (historical nonfiction) into the curriculum, these instructional practices will support the opportunity for multimodal experiential learning and help make up for what is generally lacking in history learning.

Section 1.1

Understanding across the field of literacy has changed dramatically over the last century. Depending on the definition and process of literacy that one utilizes, literacy can be reduced to a set of discreet skillsets or it can be viewed as a larger framework of ability and aptitude that enables an individual to comprehend both simple and complex meanings (Aman, 2016; Carr, 2012; Morrison, 2012).

The question remaining is what the focus of those abilities will be built around, rote intellectual development or the development of greater literate abilities and the empathy that goes with them? Be it math, physics, or history, this does not matter.

The core at the purpose of teaching is increasing breadth and depth of knowledge and an ability to analyze and synthesize that knowledge. The same goal focuses the efforts of graphic artists and writers in telling a story (Scanlon, 2015). After all, at the end of the day, the educated citizen is the best product the schooling experience can produce. With this reasoning, the distance separating the individual from greater understanding, if not mastery, of any subject lies in the degree of familiarity or mastery they have in the guiding axioms of the relevant body of knowledge (Sockman, Sutton, & Herrmann, 2016; Sutton, 2017). The challenge for educators is how to get their students to this place of understanding.

The perpetual pedagogical issue with which educators have wrestled is how to present the content they teach in a manner so that it engages the learner under its own power. In presenting this information in the current media driven culture, Thon (2017) reminds us that, regardless of the form, modern media culture is built around the construction of narratives. One can witness this through the ways that film, graphic stories, and even comic books are put together with their larger story lines. With history content and the standard manner of delivery that has characterized the field, teachers are often placed in the role of being a persuader more than an educator. To this end, the bemoaning that often accompanies a certain subject of study are the headwinds that impede the very process of learning it. We must remember that students are exactly entitled to feel this way with how schools are currently organized. At early ages, students must learn to prioritize the knowledge they gain. Everything cannot be retained, so it must be prioritized, even if that is not the guiding thought in the student's head at the time. Why is it that one topic or another is relevant and worth remembering when counted among the innumerable bodies of fact and factoids to which they are exposed? And that is just through the course of a single day. Do the math for the entire K-12 experience and the nature of an education seems to change rather quickly.

Section 1.2

History teachers who do their jobs effectively realize an important feature of human psychology with regards to history. Going past the facts and sometimes vapid sets of charts that comprise part of the history curriculum, these educators understand that a major part of what is most real for people studying history is the ability to imagine it and so to connect to it on a deeper emotional level. The stories to which we connect, in their cumulative nature, are what build our collective and other forms of cultural lore. The sheer power of lore. It seems strange to write such a short but powerful statement. But, when a person truly understands the influence of this, the part of history worth remembering, for it is the best part of what is passed down, are the stories that arise from events. Hearing these events, in whatever form they occur, forms an indelible imprint on how we perceive the world. It gives us something to which we can connect. Indeed, the lessons from these stories are sometimes the hidden precepts of history itself. This is important because it represents a connection between a body of facts or suppositions and the natural emotional dimensions of a person. While there are certainly people who would dispute the farther-reaching consequences that may come about through the power of lore, we cannot agree with them. One need only reflect on the last one hundred years, and there is no absence of events or series of actions that were not triggered or fueled in part by a narrative of some kind. After all, that is what lore is. When any person or group of people tally the narratives of their lives and of their experiences, this is how their cultural lore results. There is no group immune from this process. History teachers should be adept at utilizing media along these lines.

Incorporating this kind of media experience into classroom teaching would bring about a greater return for the effort. Despite a growing body of scholarship on the use of graphic novels, these resources have not seen widespread incorporation across the curriculum. Graphic novels are certainly a staple of school libraries and the collections of them that some individuals may have personally, but they are still on the outside. Graphic novels are often thought of as the 'easy reads' by instructors, so their full potential has yet to be realized. A pedagogy utilizing comic book and graphic novel art brings as much visual as informational content (Kang, 2017). This extra visual framework constitutes an elaborate set of extended or enriching resources in any curriculum.

History teachers can utilize graphic novels and non-fiction comic books to deliver an additional dimension of content and complexity. This visual content approach represents a complimentary instructional strategy (NCTE, 2008). Reproducing the visual aspect of the experience is part of what helps many students remember it. A comic book is, and always will remain, an intellectual but significantly emotional experience when people are engaged with their content (Galleher, Laserson, Tynan, & Crowell, 2017).

It is one thing to read about the conditions described by Upton Sinclair in “The Jungle”, but another to both read and see visual depictions of the same. The second certainly has greater and lasting quality in young minds. The value in the ability of students to discuss the convergence between bodies of fact and the nature of representation cannot be overstated.

Section 2

The impact of comic books across American culture can hardly be disputed. Over the years, they have primarily focused on the various genres of fiction, but if teachers re-evaluated the titles available in historical, biographical, and autobiographical content, they would see a plethora of options. Many classic titles have been adapted and made into graphic novels. The benefit to the student comes in several dimensions. In linking comic books’ and graphic novels’ content through the structured use of this medium in classroom settings, the teacher builds a connection to what is necessary for the student to better remember and understand the emotional connection. One example of a slightly different graphic novel industry metric is that of Manga comics. According to Aoki (2017), manga publishers have developed an extensively devoted fandom in their readership through the way their content is evolving. This is achieved through the convergence of richly complex narratives and, primarily, through the sheer visual impact of the message they bring (Gall and Gall, 2015; Maughn, 2016). This is not exclusive to manga, for it is a feature of the interest in this kind of narrative depiction. Another means lies in utilizing comic books as a medium to be illustrated by the students themselves as a pathway to achieving critical literacy. Comer (2015) advocates for an approach whereby students are the ones who do the composing and illustrating. Thus, they are no longer simply consuming, but also producing knowledge.

In reviewing the history and rise of the modern comic book, one sees a medium representing an entire institution of expression. Though at one point this art form may have represented the zenith of illustration ability and printing technology, it has far been eclipsed by other modern and alternative forms of graphic illustration. Yet, comics remain and only arguably improve (Boyer, 2012; Phelps, 2011; Ramagnoli, 2014). Put simply, nothing will take the place of a comic book. The very nature for of how a person consumes any narrative of this sort results in this it not easily being replaced. The stories and characters that inhabit comic series are richly portrayed with intricate mythologies that are woven together to form the “meat of the bone” for the reader. An undeniable part of the experience of a comic lies in remembering the detail. By this, we mean the greatest extent of detail. Alverson (2017) points to methods in which teachers often use comics to teach contemporary issues. The imagery of modern life enriches the content. Where comics and larger narratives are concerned, that is not only fun to remember, for it brings about a positive feeling to recollect, it is also greatly entertaining over which to argue ~~about~~. The term ‘argue’ would certainly come about through the presence of a lively and spirited debate or conversation. One need only go to a local comic book store or convention and this truth will manifest.

With the volume of text and material that teachers sift through in planning instruction, it is little wonder that favorite forms will be chosen. We most certainly identified our own favorites, and that is only natural because it also facilitated in accomplishing the task of learning. If, however, history teachers can reconceive of using comic books as part of their pedagogical framework, they can create an extremely unique space within the classroom. This is an area in which media specialists and librarians can assist and support. Though the practice of group reading has many names and acronyms as one travels the schools, the common element is the necessity of time for people to sit and read as part of a class or a group. Why not incorporate graphic novels or comic book reading into the classroom reading process and then respond with a class or group discussion? This is an effective and long-lasting pedagogical practice. Then, rather than considering the instructional use of comic books as “throw-away time,” these visual resources are utilized as the means to an effective end.

To the individual who may be cynical of such material as part of the curriculum, we can certainly understand the nature of the arguments or defense against including comics as a part of pedagogy. There is only so much time in the day and everyone has established instructional priorities. Where comic and graphic novel pedagogy comes to bear, it has the ability to bring with it the evocative. “More than any other, the comic book medium is founded on the evocative glimpse. Indeed, the very fabric, the mechanism, of comics is essentially a series of static snapshot panels *magically* given continuity by the reader’s attention” (Moore, Gibbons, & Higgins, 2014, p. 2). Every teacher has felt the pressure complete a certain amount of content by a certain date for any of a range of different assessments or other reasons. It is all part of instructional planning. Where do you fit all of it in? A serious question to ask, but not one that necessarily says ‘no’ to content that might be highly visual in nature.

Section 3

When one thinks of the K-12 spectrum, the use of visual imagery tends to be concentrated on the earlier stages of development with less of it being in high school. We find this contradiction to be very interesting for a number of reasons. First, the increased use of technology in our lives has a substantial component that is visual in its depiction because that is the most engaging way to present the information.

The perfect balance between visual and informational is constantly sought, but it is understood that it involves much of the visual. The second reason stems from a simple observation. We live in a time with unbridled access to information on a global scale, yet schools still work largely the same way they have for the last half century regarding the system or approach used in teaching and learning history.

The history curriculum as it is taught and experienced in schools represents something far less than the rich and varied experiences of those who have lived and died to ultimately comprise any narrative. We do not point a finger of blame at teachers because they are caught between the “rock” (students’ critical awareness and knowledge) and the “hard place” (where standardized assessments and other evaluative frameworks come into the picture). We suggest, however, that resources like graphic novels and comic books are available for learning history and could be utilized in unique and lasting ways. Why not bring about the natural convergence of two valuable things; the history curriculum that we teach and students’ natural love of imagery? Though neither of us have been K-12 students in quite some time, we would never object to this type of visually engaging information or creative approach. Comic books and graphic novels represent a form of lived experience. And, it is the lived experience of childhood where reading comics is first found to be fun.

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