

# Using Graphic Novels in the High School Classroom: Engaging Deaf Students With a New Genre

**Comics and graphic novels appeal to today's visual learner by providing unique and interesting combinations of text and graphics that engage large numbers of students.**

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**I**n this article, the four authors—Darah and Heidi (high school teachers of the Deaf) and Linda and Dana (university teacher educators)—describe a class curriculum using graphic novels in a high school English summer school class for Deaf students struggling with age-appropriate literacy skills. The project took place at a residential state school that draws students from throughout northern California. The school itself operates under a bilingual philosophy that honors the native language—American Sign Language (ASL)—and culture of the Deaf as well as promotes fluency in both ASL and written English. Although students access spoken English in various ways and to various degrees, they must learn to read and write in English.

Deaf educators at this institution regard Deafness as a unique and vibrant culture rather than a disability. In this sense, Deaf students' experiences parallel the experiences of most second-language learners. ASL is a visual language that has no written component; when Deaf students learn to read in English, they must learn a new symbolic system that, for them, has no basis in oral language. Like other English-language learners (ELLs) they must learn the language as they learn to read and write; however, they must do so without receiving the support of oral interactions with family members and friends or hearing the sounds of the spoken language. Because of the visual nature of Deaf students' learning, the idea of teaching literacy with graphic novels appealed to us. All student names are pseudonyms.

## An Interest in Comic Books

“Are we really going to read only comic books!?”

In 2007, Heidi's and Darah's comic book fandom drove them to attend WonderCon, an annual comic book, science fiction, and film convention. While they were wandering the convention hall, scouting for reading material and checking out the costumes, the title of one workshop caught their eye: “The Secret Origin of Good Readers” (Cruz, 2007). During the workshop,

a librarian explained her research relating to comic book use and struggling readers. Heidi and Darah left with a bag of free reading material, some website links, and ideas.

Inspired by the workshop, Heidi and Darah volunteered to teach a summer school English class for high school students who are Deaf. These were students who had failed 9th–12th-grade English classes the previous year primarily due to language and self-efficacy difficulties. Students reflected diverse backgrounds and experiences. Most of them had little experience with comics, except for some exposure to Disney characters and some movies based on comic books, such as *X-Men*. A few students expressed an interest in manga (serialized Japanese comic books) or daily newspaper strips. (For definitions and more background on comic books and graphic novels, see sidebar.) All were incredulous and somewhat skeptical that teachers would want to create a class dedicated to comic books.

Linda and Dana, meanwhile, met Gene Luen Yang, a high school computer teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area and author of *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel nominated for the National Book Award and winner of the Michael Printz Award for literary excellence in young adult literature, at the National Book Festival in Washington, DC, USA, in September 2007. He addressed a huge tent full of mostly men and boys of varying ages who listened and laughed as Gene described three reasons why it is bad to become a graphic artist:

1. It takes forever to make a graphic novel, even a simplified one.
2. It is not particularly remunerative—around the turn of the last century it was a shrinking market, although recently comic books and graphic novels have been making a comeback and constitute a growing segment of the book market.
3. Being an author of comics and graphic novels is not sexy. (Not even a little bit, he insisted.)

Fascinated by the attraction of young people, particularly males, to the genre, Linda and Dana interviewed Gene (see Smetana & Grisham, 2007).

## Comic Books and Graphic Novels

Comics or comic books are magazines or books containing sequential art in the form of a narrative. The term “comics” in this context does not refer to comic strips (such as Peanuts or Dilbert). Comics can appear in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, superhero books, historical, action/adventure, realistic fiction, biography, humor, horror, romance, political commentary, adaptation of classics, and manga (Japanese comics).

“Graphic novels” usually refers to comics with lengthy and complex story lines similar to those of novels, and they are often aimed at mature audiences. The term also encompasses comic short story anthologies, and in some cases bound collections of previously published comic book series. Will Eisner’s book *A Contract With God and Other Tenement Stories*, a series of four stories about his life growing up in the tenements of Brooklyn in the 1930s, made the term popular. Eisner described a graphic novel as sequential art—a series of illustrations which, when viewed in order, tell a story.

Graphic novels are not limited to topics of interest to teenage or young adults. In 1992, Art Spiegelman was honored with a Pulitzer Prize for his graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* that recounts his father’s survival in Auschwitz. In comic book format, this novel presents the horrors of the Holocaust, with Nazis portrayed as cats and Jews as mice.

Spiegelman’s honor aided in the legitimizing of graphic novels as a literary form and the public began to realize that Spiegelman and other writer/illustrators were producing serious, ambitious work in this genre (McTaggart, 2005).

When the four authors of this article met and talked about our experiences, it became obvious to all of us that we needed to share them with other teachers and teacher educators. Linda is a special educator, and Dana is a general educator, both in literacy and teacher preparation. Linda and Dana are colleagues at California State University, East Bay, and worked

**Students examine how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it affects the message of the work.**

together on an article about graphic novels (Smetana & Grisham, 2007). Darah and Heidi teach at the California School for the Deaf in nearby Fremont, one of two state-supported schools that provide residential educational services to Deaf students. In Deaf education, American Sign Language (ASL) is considered the home language (L1) for students. English is L2, a second language that Deaf students must learn. The four of us came together because of our interest in graphic novels and the positive impact that we felt they might have on striving readers.

### **Why Deaf Students and a New Genre?**

Generally speaking, second-language learners experience a ladder-type progression for acquiring the mainstream language (in this case English). The first rung on this acquisition ladder is the development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) through daily conversations with native English speakers as well as mainstream television and radio (Cummins, 1996). Once this first rung is established, the second-language learner may progress to the second rung: the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This rung is crucial for any kind of academic success in English. The challenge for Deaf students is simple: while they are also second-language learners, the physiological limitation of deafness presents significant challenges for accessing and developing BICS; limited BICS acquisition leads to a profound struggle in CALP development and reading progression often comes to a standstill (Cummins, 1996).

This need for BICS in English for the Deaf leads naturally to the idea of using comics and graphic novels. They may supply the natural conversational input Deaf students are lacking. Due to their visual nature, comics and graphic novels provide a context-rich, high-interest story environment for acquiring new vocabulary.

The skills students use to interpret graphic novels include analysis, interpretation, and conjecture, all

higher order thinking skills. Thomsen (1996) stated that “visual communication is rich, evocative and immediate, and transcends barriers that language sometimes raises. When pictures and words are used together to communicate, the result can be much greater than either alone could produce” (n.p.).

In graphic novels, pictures communicate the ideas, themes, and underlying emotions, making the genre complex. The visual nature forces readers to use what they know to create the unwritten dialogue—a story not fully conveyed by the words. Students analyze how the use of color, light, shadow, and lines influence the tone and mood of the story. They determine how color affects emotion, and how facial expressions and body language convey emotions and feelings not printed in the text. In addition, students examine how pictures can stereotype people, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism or the lack of it affects the message of the work. Readers derive information from facial and bodily expressions and from the composition and viewpoint of the illustrations. In the same manner as students think when watching a movie, they deduce what happened yet was not explicitly stated in the interval between one image and the next. This genre is appealing to Deaf students, whose communication system is visual, but can also appeal to wide range of readers.

When students study the construction of the graphic novel, they become exposed to the qualities of narrative text, film, and poetry. Graphic novels are like prose in that they are written in a printed format, but they are also like film in that they tell a story through visual images that give the impression of movement accompanied by the characters’ dialogue. The sequential pictures in the graphic novel may contain dialogue, yet they convey important aspects of the story visually. In many instances graphic novels provide opportunities for students to derive intangible feelings through allusion rather than direct description.

Many readers growing up with television and video games are contemporary young adults who look for print media that contain the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contribute to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy (Bucher & Manning, 2004). McCloud (1993)

also concluded that graphic novels are a powerful tool for conveying the literary experience to a generation of readers comfortable with television and computers. Thus graphic novels provide a valid vehicle for learning and knowing in an increasingly media-rich world.

## Graphic Novels and a Wider Audience of ELLs

In addition to motivating reluctant readers, graphic novels have been found to be successful with ELLs other than Deaf students. The illustrations provide contextual support and clues to the meaning of the written narrative, help demystify the text, and increase comprehension (Cary, 2004). Cary added that graphic novels and comics can assist second-language learning by providing engaging content in a sequential, logical order. Children who grow up on comic books often seem to have better vocabulary and understanding of how to use verb tenses than those who do not read comics (Kerr & Culhane, 2000). Indeed, the average comic book introduces children to twice as many words as the average children's book and five times as many words as they were likely to be exposed to in the average child–adult conversation. Thus for Deaf students, who have not experienced many child–adult conversations in English, this genre provides a scaffolded resource for vocabulary and syntax.

Krashen (1993) reported that graphic novels are linguistically appropriate and bear no negative impact on language acquisition, and, in fact, light reading (which includes graphic novels) positively correlates with achievement. Graphic novels may require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone (Lavin, 1998). Graphic novel readers have learned to understand print but also can decode facial and body expressions, the symbolic meanings of certain images and postures, metaphors and similes, and other social and literacy nuances teenagers are mastering as they move from childhood to maturity (Simmons, 2003). Thus, readers must not only decode the words and the illustrations but also must identify events between the visual sequences. In informal discussions, teachers report that some reluctant readers will select a graphic novel over a typical novel as the illustrations support the text. As a result of student engagement and the

development of skills, graphic novels encourage literacy not only for Deaf students but for all readers.

## The Appeal of Using Graphic Novels With Struggling High School Readers

“Can I take this book home with me?”

One appeal of comic books and graphic novels is that they seem somewhat subversive to students. Many teachers understand what comics and graphic novels have to offer, but students may not regard them as they do other genres of text. As long as teachers do not basalize comics and graphic novels, students will find them engaging. By using the term *basalize*, we mean that teachers spend so much time teaching discrete skills that the pleasure of reading is reduced and reading becomes rote and dry. (See Tables 1 and 2 for teaching resources on comic books and graphic novels.)

## A Learning Unit for Comics and Graphic Novels

“I don't know what you're doing, but it's working.”

Heidi and Darah initially took their cue from the WonderCon workshop and looked for materials that had specifically been created for instructional purposes. The convention workshop used a comic about diversity called *Scrapyard Detectives* as well as issues of *Archie*. However, this idea was quickly scrapped. For the authors, these comics just did not create the natural pull of diving into a favorite book. Heidi and Darah narrowed the focus of the class to highlight the theme of Teens in Comics, using comic books that were exciting personal favorites of the teachers, which left a wealth of books to choose from. Primary selections for the curriculum were *Invincible*, *Runaways*, *Fray*, *X-Men*, *Gifted*, *Plain Janes*, and *American Born Chinese* (see Table 3 for an annotated list of comic books).

The class was structured around literature discussion groups preceded by a minilesson on a topic, such as modeling text, and followed by an application activity. Literature discussions (Daniels, 2002) offer students a structured academic opportunity to talk about the books they are reading. Heidi and Darah allowed

**Table 1 Web Resources and Information on Comic Books**

Website	Description
<a href="http://www.comics.org/index.lasso">www.comics.org/index.lasso</a>	This site is run by hobbyists who are seeking to scan all comic books into a "Grand Comic book Database" (GCD).
<a href="http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=867">www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id = 867</a>	This ReadWriteThink Lesson Plan for grades 3–5 includes a standards-based lesson with step-by-step instruction, including reproducible documents, such as a comic strip planning sheet and comic book rubric and lessons to build background information.
<a href="http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/comic/">www.readwritethink.org/materials/comic/</a>	This page provides a comic creator that prompts students to create comics step by step.
<a href="http://www.comics.com/shortcuts">www.comics.com/shortcuts</a>	This webpage provides lessons for commercially published cartoons and comics.
<a href="http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com">www.graphicnovels.brodart.com</a>	This website includes "kid-safe" graphic novels. Under the Links section are a wealth of resources and sites.
<a href="http://www.tcj.com">www.tcj.com</a>	The Comics Journal (TCJ) magazine "covers the comics medium from an arts-first perspective." The site is owned and operated by Fantagraphics Books, a leading publisher of alternative comic books.
<a href="http://www.uky.edu/Projects/Chemcomics">www.uky.edu/Projects/Chemcomics</a>	For young scientists, this site contains comic book images linked to the chemical elements via the periodic table, called The Comic Book Periodic Table of the Elements.

**Table 2 Resources for Teaching With Graphic Novels**

Graphic Novels: Suggestions for Librarians. Retrieved from [www.ala.org/oif/ifissues/graphic novels.htm](http://www.ala.org/oif/ifissues/graphic%20novels.htm)

The Original No Flying No Tights. Retrieved from [noflyingnotights.com](http://noflyingnotights.com). This website, linked from ReadWriteThink.org, is further divided into three sites. The original No Flying No Tights for teens presents reviews of graphic novels for teens. The companion website, Sidekicks, presents provides reviews of graphic novels for kids, and The Lair presents reviews of graphic novels for older teens and adults.

Beach, R., Appleman, D., Hynds, S., & Wilhelm, J. (2006). *Teaching literature to adolescents*. New York: Erlbaum.

Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2008). *Teaching visual literacy: Using comic books, graphic novels, anime, cartoons, and more to develop comprehension and thinking skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Norton, B. (2003). The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers. *The Reading Teacher*, 57(2), 140–147.

Oehlberg, B.E. (2006). *Reaching and teaching stressed and anxious learners in grades 4–8: Strategies for relieving stress and trauma in schools and classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Pennella, B. (2007). *The POW!-er in the classroom! A teacher's perspective*. Retrieved March 9, 2008, from [www.graphic novels.brodart.com/teachers\\_perspective.htm](http://www.graphicnovels.brodart.com/teachers_perspective.htm)

Starr, L. (2008). *Eek! Comics in the classroom!* Retrieved July 27, 2009, from [www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/profdev/profdev105.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/profdev/profdev105.shtml)

Weiner, S. (2005). *The 101 best graphic novels* (2nd ed.). New York: Nantier Beall Minoustchine.

students to choose their own groups as much as possible based on the book they wanted to read. They also included an additional 20 minutes of free reading time a day, using the teachers' extensive outside reading collections. Mounds of books piled on the counter of the classroom gave the students plenty to feast on during the four weeks.

Although much of the professional literature on graphic novels has focused on literary quality and motivation, the contribution to understanding of content cannot be ignored. Graphic novels may help students explore such social issues as terrorism, AIDS, and discrimination (Bucher & Manning, 2004). In addition, graphic novels may present alternative views of

### Table 3 Annotated List of Comic Books

Our goal was to pick authentic stories with a teen focus that the students could really sink their teeth into and enjoy. Because most of these novels were not intended for teaching high school students but for an adult audience, there are instances of violence, language, and some sexual situations (but no nudity) in many of the outside reading novels.

Core novels (used for literature circles):

Some of these comics are collections that are a first in a series, roughly the size and length of a typical novel. The sequels were provided as outside reading if the students wanted to continue with the stories. Most did.

*Invincible: Volume One* (Robert Kirkman and Cory Walker, Image Comics, August 3, 2005)

Mark Grayson has been waiting to develop his superpowers, just like his superhero dad Omni Man. But will he be able to live up to the expectations of a world that knows his father? And what if his father is not exactly as he seems? This series was a big hit with all of our students.

*Runaways: Volume One* (Brian K. Vaughn, Marvel Comics, February 1, 2006)

Every teenager knows that adults are evil. But what if your parents were *really* evil? Six privileged southern California teens go on the run from their truly wicked parents, after liberating a few of their parents' powerful toys and unlocking powers of their own. Our students were so wrapped up in the cleverly written story of these wise-cracking teens they did not want to stop and discuss it.

*The Plain Janes* (Cecil Castellucci and Jim Rugg, Minx, May 2, 2007)

Jane survived an urban terrorist bombing but lost all sense of herself. After her worried parents move her to the safety of the suburbs, can she find herself again? And more important, can she find a way to overcome her fear? This novel was a big pleaser for the girls in our class, who enjoyed watching Jane find friends, flirt with her crush, defy authority, and create street art.

*American Born Chinese* (Gene Luen Yang, First Second, October 30, 2007)

Three stories of identity intertwine: a legendary monkey king, a Chinese-American boy named Danny, and a scurrilous stereotype ponder issues of self-acceptance. This was the winner of the 2007 Prinz award for multicultural literature and finalist for the National Book Award. In our students' favorite scene, the character Danny applies pink powder soap to his armpits because his parents don't believe in deodorant.

*Fray* (Joss Whedon, Dark Horse, December 9, 2003)

Set in a grim future, teenage thief Fray finds herself the "chosen one" who must fight against the threat of the "lurks," shadowy vampires who prey on the innocent, with the help of her demon Watcher. Fans of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* will recognize this spin-off of the Buffyverse.

*Astonishing X-Men: Gifted* (Joss Whedon, Tandem Library, December 29, 2004)

Similar issues of a "mutant cure" discussed in the film *X-Men 3* continue in this series, which has teenage mutant Shadowcat at the lead of the story. The idea of being different as either a gift or a curse, and the possibility of the removal through a "cure," parallels Deafness and the recent rise in cochlear implants for Deaf children.

culture and history to make them more accessible to students (Schwarz, 2002). For Deaf students in particular, graphic novels can provide access to a world context that may be largely unknown to them.

The teachers wanted Deaf students to enjoy the comics and graphic novels but also to have in-depth discussions of the texts and recognize key literature elements such as story arc, hero archetypes, and characterization, as well as features specific to the comic genre, such as page layout and color. Not only are graphic novels and comics interesting; they are linguistically appropriate material for all students. To read and comprehend graphic novels, the student must

use many of the same skills that are needed to understand traditional works of prose fiction. Graphic novels require that the reader be actively engaged in the process of comprehending a range of literary devices including narrative structures, metaphor and symbolism, point of view, the use of puns and alliteration, intertextuality, and inference.

Although all the students were reading, they did not engage in much discussion during class. After a week of frustration and apparent failure to accomplish class goals, the principal of the high school drew Heidi's and Darah's attention to an interesting phenomena happening each day before class started and

during the students' free time. Their students were reading constantly. While other students ran around or chatted, they sat silently with their noses buried in their favorite comic books. Several of the students, although not talking to their discussion groups, formed their own impromptu literature circles with students outside the class and even staff members, discussing the books, making predictions, and writing their own endings. They made reading recommendations to one another and burned through series after series. Sharing thoughts about graphic novels in an informal atmosphere rather than in the formality of the classroom seemed to appeal more to these students.

The fact that students read a complete series of books indicates that they also comprehended the text. Nancy Frey (cited in Starr, 2004) stated that using graphic novels to teach comprehension is often more effective than using traditional text materials. She explained,

Struggling readers have often been told for years that inferencing is “reading between the lines”—an explanation that often creates more confusion for the reader. After all, if you’re having trouble reading what’s on the line, when do you ever get to read between? (n.p.)

The structure of the graphic novel lends itself to inferencing, as much of the story is in pictures.

### **Using Graphic Novels to Foster Academic Language**

Amid students reading all those books, Heidi and Darah tried to get Deaf students in touch with some deeper concepts related to stories and how our Deaf culture creates them. They taught minilessons that included the Hero cycle and Hero types as described by the American mythologist Joseph Campbell (see [www.jcf.org](http://www.jcf.org)), and students created a bulletin board where they classified characters from their comics based on that idea of archetypes. Some students mused over their place in hero categorization, debating whether they considered themselves a warrior-type hero or a lost soul. The teachers also introduced ideas of premise, plot, and twist in the creation of stories, especially comic books. The comic *Invincible* provided a great model for this concept as the “sketchbook” part of the book included the author’s own summary of the premise, plot, and twist, as well as sample scripts and sketches of characters. Elements of the lesson planning are found in Table 4.

To better help Deaf students understand specific concepts, particularly storytelling elements, Darah and Heidi relied on familiar and unfamiliar movies to provide an additional visual context for classroom discussions. For overall introduction to comics

**Table 4 Lesson Template: Summer School Teens in Comics Lesson Plan**

Goal: To create a multiple-page story or excerpt in comic book form, illustrating knowledge of characterization. Additional lesson plans may be found at [msodelson.wetpaint.com](http://msodelson.wetpaint.com).

Activity	Lesson description
Lecture/Panel Discussion: 1. Introduce topic/guest speaker 2. Read excerpt related to topic 3. Discuss, using questions from posted list 4. Journal response: individual then group 5. Poster: whole class	Topic: Flat vs. Round Characters  Using copies of excerpts from an Archie comic and an X-Men excerpt, students will describe the characters Betty and Shadowcat in a large-group discussion. They will then work in small groups to create two posters describing the characters.  Discussion questions: What are the attributes of each character? What evidence can we use to infer these attributes? Which is a richer character as described by the author? Which character is more realistic in terms of appearance, behavior, and dialogue? Which character more closely resembles teenagers today?
Literature Circles: 30 minutes reading 30 minutes discussion	Using the discussion questions, students will select one or two main characters from their reading to discuss in terms of how richly (flat or round) they are portrayed by the author.

and graphic novels, as well as to highlight the key literature components of premise, plot, and twist, the students watched the film *Unbreakable*, in which everyman Bruce Willis comes to terms with his own superhero powers with help from comic gallery owner Samuel L. Jackson. This film by M. Night Shyamalan follows the traditional comic book structure of premise, plot, and twist in addition to illustrating the basic story arc that narratives follow.

To illustrate characterization, students watched the Disney film *Sky High*, in which traditional comic power archetypes (freezing, super speed and strength, flying, and so forth) have been recycled into a typical high school teen drama set to a 1980s soundtrack. This also provided an opportunity to talk about the naming of comic book characters and how traditionally names reflect the powers a superhero possesses, sometimes with obvious or ironic results. The students' favorite lesson involved watching clips from some of the teachers' favorite movies to illustrate the abnormal/normal character in a normal/abnormal situation, the premise of many of these stories. These included clips from *Shaun of the Dead*, *Blade*, *Trinity*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and *Little Miss Sunshine*.

Using these closed captioned movies really helped when later discussing the students' own comic book creations. These movies and subsequent discussions provided a scaffold for the students to plan the premise for their own stories, plot their story arcs, select characters, and flesh out descriptions.

### **Synthesizing Key Concepts to Create a Comic Book**

Nancy Frey described using comic books with blank dialogue boxes to teach dialogue writing (cited in Starr, 2004). The wordless representations provide a foundation for the story. To complete the dialogue, students need to be able to interpret the representations and translate the images, thoughts, and feelings into print. Creating a comic book entails the application of what students know about model text (published comic books) to the creation of their own product. For Deaf students writing can be challenging, as they may have limited English-language skills for expressing themselves in written text. Working

collaboratively on this project helped Deaf students engage more fully with the writing process.

Creating a comic book or graphic novel means more than writing the text or creating dialogue boxes. Bedenbaugh's (2006) criteria for a quality comic include coherent, imaginative, interesting, and well-written story line. Language should be accessible and appropriate, words and pictures must be interdependent, and illustrations should provide a subtle commentary on the printed word and move the story forward.

Every week students wrote a response to the book they were reading, and in the last week they were asked to put together everything they had learned into a comic book proposal of their own. Students created a two-page script; designed a panel layout; discussed the premise, plot, and twist of their story; and created an archetypal character sketch of their main character. They presented their work in poster format, as if trying to sell their comic book idea to a publisher. (See Figure 1 for examples of student work.)

Some students came up with great concepts and only needed minimal support to achieve their goals. Others had good concepts but had trouble carrying their ideas through to completion, particularly relating to the plot. Darah and Heidi observed anecdotally that students who had the most success and created the most fascinating stories were students who had read the most in the four weeks, regardless of reading level or ability, because of their deep exposure to the genre. This reading seemed to create models for the students to scaffold their understanding and supplied a safety net for their creations.

Beyond the summer school class, many students' passion for comics has continued and spread to other students. Darah's classroom library has further expanded to include more graphic novels that are now in heavy circulation in the high school. As a result of the success of the project, the school has added to the senior English curriculum the graphic novels *Maus*, *American Born Chinese*, and *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*.

### **Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators**

In a review of the literature on education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) students, Luckner, Sebald,



Figure 1C “Booger Boy” Hero Archetype

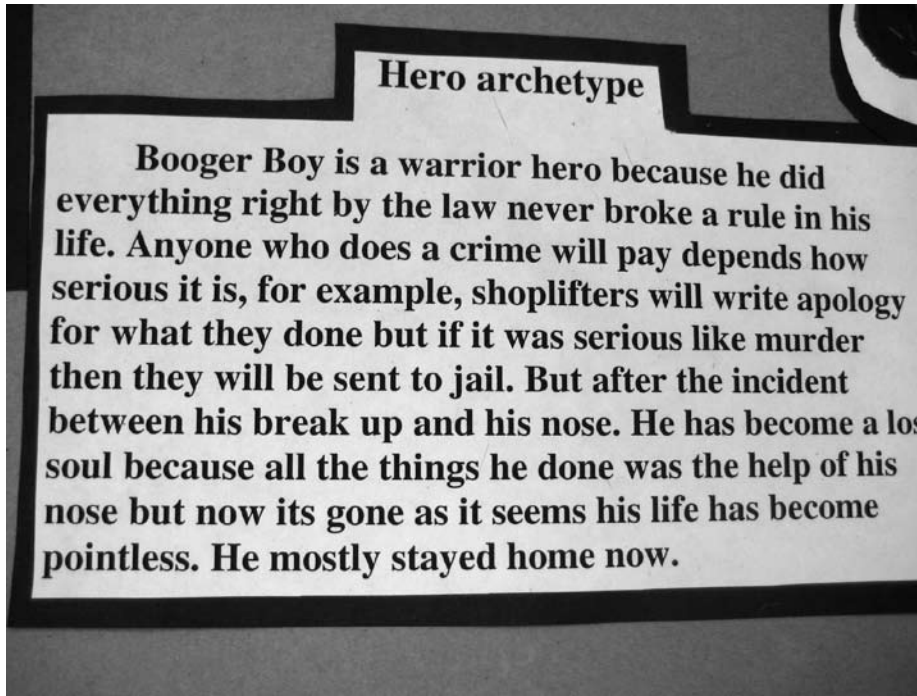


Figure 1D “Booger Boy” Plot Twist

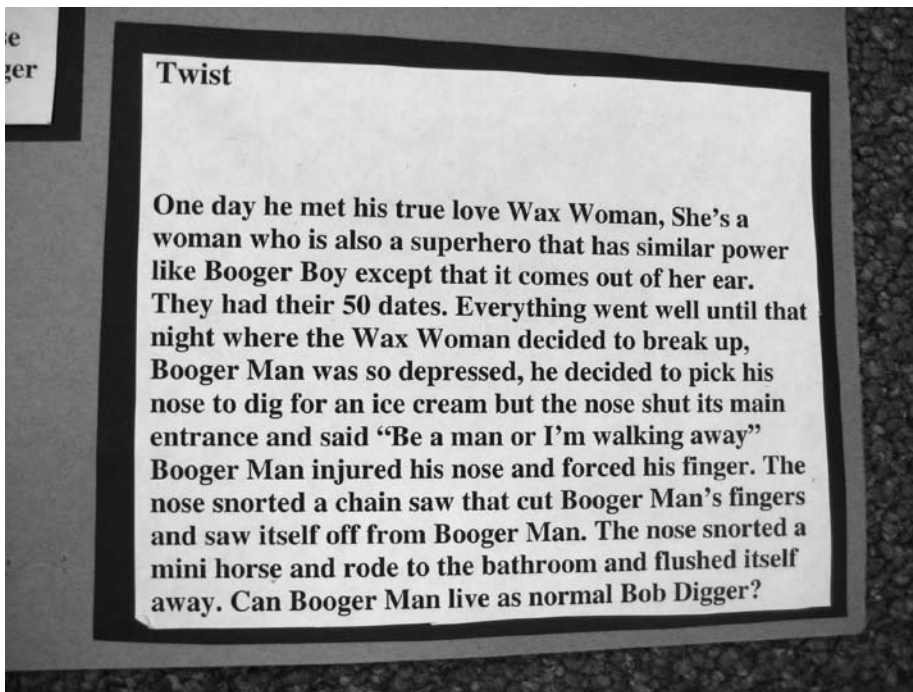


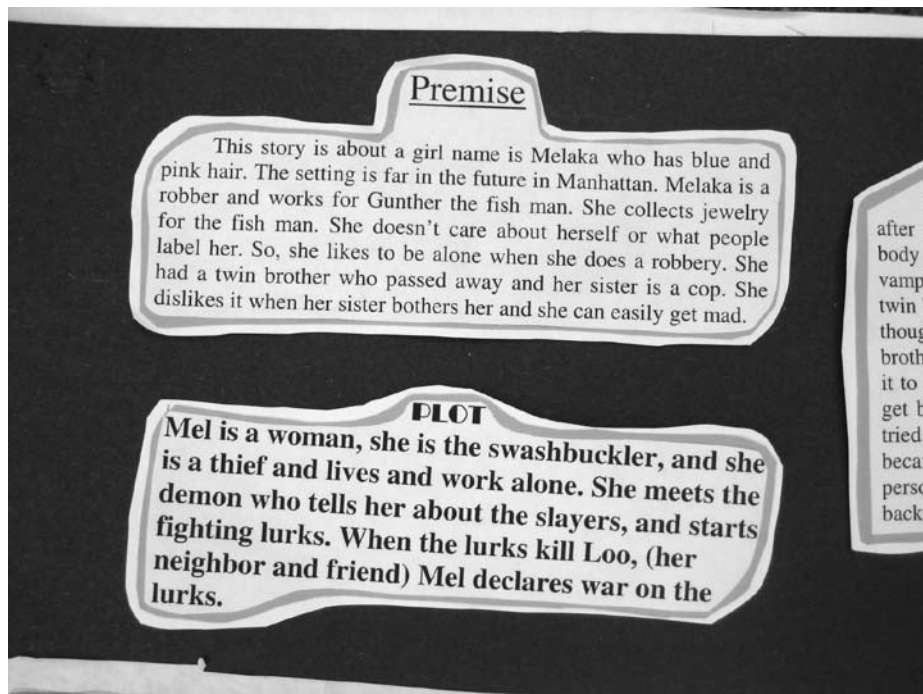
Figure 1E Deaf Student's Comic Proposal for "Fray"



Cooney, Young, and Muir (2006) summarized the preferred outcomes of reading comprehension instruction. First, teachers need to create a learning environment where students come to understand that text makes sense. The nature of comics and graphic novels provides integration that is supportive to students who do not have aural experience with English. Another element of effective instruction for Deaf students is to provide materials that are engaging and interesting. We found that evidence of the extensive reading reflects students' engagement with this genre. Luckner and colleagues also cited the need for scaffolding, which the unit on graphic novels provides through the congruence of pictures and text. We recommend that Deaf students have opportunities to respond to the texts they read in a variety of ways. In the unit on comics and graphic novels, Deaf students read, discussed, drew, wrote, and pretended to sell their comic book proposals to an audience of their peers, who role-played the publisher audience.

Although Darah and Heidi taught this unit on comic books in a summer school class for Deaf students, all of us argue that secondary English teachers

Figure 1F Literary Elements for "Fray"



in both middle and high school need to take a closer look at the advantages provided by a unit on comic books and graphic novels for all of their students. Comics and graphic novels appeal to today's visual learner because they provide unique and interesting combinations of text and graphics that engage large numbers of students. Librarians and teachers have found that comics attract kids and motivate them to read. In particular, boys who often shun reading are motivated to read through the use of comic books (McFann, 2004; Smetana & Grisham, 2007). Teachers who provide materials in which students can see the forms and features the written word can take and the link to visual images may help to create more enthusiastic readers.

The rich, complex plots and narrative structures of comic books engage advanced readers. Schwarz (2002) indicated that comics may be used to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue and that using comic books can enhance student media skills. Thus, students can explore elements such as how color affects emotion, how angles of viewing affect perception, and how realism, or the lack of it, plays into the message of the work.

The research literature is beginning to reflect that some heretofore neglected genres (e.g., science fiction, comic books, Internet sources) may provide the basis for teaching critical and analytical skills to students (Grisham & Wolsey, 2006). It is not necessary for teachers to love a genre or to be technological experts to support academic learning. As Frey and Fisher (2004) noted, "These forms of popular culture [graphic novels] provided a visual vocabulary for all sorts of scaffolding, writing techniques, particularly dialogue, tone, and mood" (p. 24). Tackling difficult subjects is another valid use of comic books. For example, Schwarz (2002) wrote explicitly about Spiegelman's *Maus* as a way to scaffold the Holocaust. Schwartz noted, "An important benefit of graphic novels is that they present alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways" (n.p.).

Initial teacher preparation programs should consider the inclusion of graphic novels in literacy methods courses and children's literature courses, highlighting their usefulness in teaching reading—particularly to struggling readers, ELLs, and boys. For example,

a common practice is to use a comic book version of a "classic" such as *Romeo and Juliet* to scaffold the storyline prior to tackling the original's Elizabethan English. Comics can introduce students to literature which they might not otherwise encounter (Schwarz, 2002). As with the unit Darah and Heidi taught, bringing comics into the classroom can also stimulate the exploration of the medium itself, increasingly a computer-assisted effort, as noted by award-winning graphic artist, Gene Luen Yang (Smetana & Grisham, 2007).

Teachers may use comic books in many ways to support student learning and scaffold reading and writing and for other important educational purposes: stimulating critical thinking, providing alternative views of history, and for problem-solving in various content areas. There is more to discover—but first, we must begin to use this genre and become comfortable with it. As a case in point, Heidi and Darah, both 30-something teachers, are quite comfortable teaching this genre. Linda and Dana, teacher educators who are a bit older, learned a great deal through the process of writing this article and now include comic books and graphic novels in the courses they teach in their university teacher preparation programs. They continue to engage in research about the efficacy of using graphic novels in the classroom.

### Note

*In all references to Deaf students, Deaf culture, and Deafness we use a capital D to identify the cultural and linguistic minority that is the Deaf community—a group with a common cultural identity, language, and customs—rather than denote a pathological view of deafness as a physical disability or medical condition. We also consider Deaf students to be English-language learners.*

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