

## GRAPHIC NOVELS: DIFFERENT TEXTS FOR DIFFERENT TIMES

IBSC Conference workshop by Di Laycock

*Since my presentation slides have little text, I'm providing instead the notes to accompany my PowerPoint.*

In the interests of the environment and weight restrictions on luggage, there are no handouts for this session. Instead, I have a website where I've posted links to information and resources on graphic novels. They include articles on the educational value of graphic novels, instructional strategies for using graphic novels, and a Voicethread presentation of mine that is similar to this one. The site is a work in progress, so do come back and visit every now and then. <http://sites.google.com/site/bcgraphicnovels/>

I'd also recommend that anyone interested in using graphic novels in their classrooms should have a look at: *Understanding comics: The invisible art* by Scott McCloud (1993), *Teaching graphic novels* (2010) by Katie Monnin, and *The secret origin of good readers* by Robyn Hill (Ed). The last title is a free download from the Internet (details from the website above).

### **INTRODUCTION**

The contemporary communication landscape is indisputably a visual one, and much has been written on the responsibility of educators to address the literacy needs of the young inhabitants of this landscape—those who might best be described as members of the *Eye Generation*; a generation born and raised on a diet of visual media. To this end, current curriculum documents for English/Language Arts<sup>1</sup> in most schools mandate the viewing and representing of image-based texts as a means to develop multiliteracies in students. Whilst it is recognized that the English classroom, where different approaches to literacy are drawn together with different textual mediums and modes, is an ideal environment in which to address students' literacy needs, teachers in other subject areas should not abrogate their responsibility to nurture the development of functional and critical literacies in their students.

Over the last decade, one particular format of image based text - the graphic novel - has attracted interest from educators in response to research indicating the capacity of graphic novels to facilitate the development in students of alphabetic, visual, critical and cultural literacies. Contra to this positive view of graphic novels, however, a compelling body of professional literature also indicates that an *interest* in graphic novels has not translated into teachers' *practice*. At present, there has been little research into teachers' experiences with graphic novels to shed light on this hesitancy to embrace them in the classroom. However, a small number of studies suggest teachers' caution towards the use of graphic novels stems from a lack of familiarity with them, along with inadequate professional support for their use. These research

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<sup>1</sup> From this point I will refer to English/ Language Arts as just "English".

findings are strengthened by similar findings regarding teachers' use of popular culture texts, and the implementation of visual literacy initiatives by teachers.

In this workshop, I hope to address the sense of caution teachers may have concerning the use of graphic novels by looking at the well-researched rationale for using them in the classroom, and by highlighting texts and strategies that can support such use.

### **WHAT IS A GRAPHIC NOVEL?**

Firstly we need to ensure that we share an understanding of what graphic novels are, and that's no easy task. Some definitions focus on the length of the narrative, others rely on publishing specifications such as paper weight and binding, whilst yet others confine their definitions to the artistic style of the format. On top of this, some creators of graphic novels refuse to even acknowledge the term, claiming it's merely an attempt to legitimize the format by divorcing them from their rather checkered history. Perhaps Neil Gaiman best sums up this perspective in his comment that, when he was described as a graphic novelist, it was akin to no longer being called a hooker but rather a lady of the evening.

I define the term *graphic novel* simply, and by drawing on the most common elements of available definitions, as a complete and extended comics narrative. That is, a graphic novel is a long story with a beginning, middle and end that is created in the comics medium. But this begs the question "What's comics?"

Scott McCloud (1993), author of the seminal work *Understanding comics: The invisible art*, defines comics as an artistic medium in which images, or words and images are arranged side-by-side and in a particular order. Comics, therefore, is *juxtaposed sequential art*.<sup>2</sup>

Comics can be published in different *formats*; just as the medium of film might be presented as a trailer, short film or full-length movie. A **comic strip** usually consists of a very short and simple story (in terms of plot and character analysis) told in horizontal blocks of three to five panels. A **comic book** stretches comics into a magazine of twenty to forty pages. The story might be complete or more often than not, is serialized with a "continuity plot". The **graphic novel** is a comic book on steroids; the big brother of comic books. It might contain one complete extended narrative, or a compilation of previously serialized stories. Their length allows graphic novels to be as deep and meaningful as their word-only cousins. It's a case of size does matter, and in graphic novels the size difference is both physical and intellectual. Graphic novels can be fiction or non-fiction, can span a wide range of genres, and can be delivered through paper or electronic platforms.

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<sup>2</sup> The singular verb with the use of "comics" is used as it is the "comics medium" being referred to. It should not be confused with the popular use of "comics" as an abbreviation for "comic books".

Manga is the term used for Japanese comics. Whilst often discussed hand-in-hand with graphic novels because it is often published as an extended narrative and bound in book-form, manga is usually serialized, uses different conventions to Western comics, is aimed at different audiences, and has different publishing features.

You can see from my definition of the comics medium how, with its juxtaposed and sequential images, graphic novels can be differentiated from other image-based texts such as film, picture books or stand-alone artworks. This is not to say that the knowledge and skills necessary to decode these media are mutually exclusive. There are certainly elements of a visual grammar that can be used across a range of image-based texts. I'm thinking here of elements such as colour, line, texture, shape, form, vectorality (focal point and directional tension) and implantation (position and balance).

### **WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM?**

Armed with a definition of graphic novels, I'd like to consider next the rationale for using them in the classroom. And while my focus will be on the English classroom at a high school level, the ideas offered are transferable to all subjects and to all levels of schooling.

As I said in my introduction, the educational value of graphic novels for the facilitation of multiliteracies in students is well documented, and there are teachers putting them to excellent use in their classrooms. But the flip side of this reality is that not all teachers view graphic novels as valid literature and the "stuff" of classrooms.

Currently the link between the contemporary communication landscape and the texts being used in classrooms is just not being made. We must recognize that the times have changed, the *lifeworlds* of our students have changed, and, according to research into brain plasticity, our students have also changed. We need to ask ourselves, therefore, if we have changed both our thinking *and* practice to reflect these changes.

For many of us, it's not easy to make the link between the different times and the different texts. What Gunther Kress (2003, p. 1)) terms the *world shown* is very different to the *world told*; the world in which many of us were raised and trained. Our visual world is the product of what many literacy educators consider a communication revolution, second only to the revolution produced by the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century (Monnin, 2011). It's a revolution that brings with it an obligation for educators to facilitate the development of multiliterate students; that is, students who are literate across a range of text types and delivery platforms (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

If we haven't already, we must liberate our notion of literacy from the traditional notion of being able to read and write alphabetic texts. To do this, graphic novels offer a perfect option; especially for those wanting to retain something of the "old"-words on paper, with something of the "new"-images.

## **OPPOSITION TO GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM**

As I said earlier, exposing students to contemporary texts isn't always easy and graphic novels are a good case in point. Despite evidence of the educational value of graphic novels, some sectors of society continue to ignore the changing face of literacy and still privilege the world-told over the world-shown. Take for example the views of controversial Australian journalist Miranda Devine (2008), who in commenting on proposed changes to the English curriculum, has this to say about the status of the image:

*Written language is the highest form of expression, the purest way of communicating ideas, of pinning down the abstract, describing the concrete, explaining the world...While oral language and iconography - pictures - are important, it is the written word that has helped us most to think. To elevate pictures and sounds to equal status is to rewind human evolution and primitivize the brain.*

Obviously Ms Devine has a short memory. Looking at images of events such as Neil Armstrong's first step onto the moon and 9/11, I think it's safe to say that images can certainly capture moments which defy description through words, and can do a damn good job of, what Ms Devine refers to as "describing the concrete and explaining the world".

Along with a bad rap from some media people, comics has also had to overcome a history of suspicion. Comics still suffer from the legacy of the anti-comics campaign in the early 1950s in the United States, where burnings of comic books were held in places such as Birminghampton, New York. Such action arose, for example, from accusations that Batman and Robin promoted homosexuality; Wonder Woman was a bad role model for girls; Superman's ability to defy the laws of gravity was unnatural; and that any comic where the "baddies" won would corrupt American youth. These fears were voiced in the now-famous publication by Frederic Wertham (1954), *Seduction of the innocent*, and culminated in a Senate investigation into the link between reading comics and juvenile delinquency. These actions and attitudes created a legacy that still torments the comics medium today, regardless of the fact that the medium has evolved, as have its readers.

Another source of tension surrounding the use of graphic novels in classrooms is the attitude that teachers must substitute them for word-texts. Unlike Ms Devine and other language and literary purists, we need to recognize that the inclusion of image-based texts is not an attempt to subvert the written word by pitting it against another medium. Instead, our objective in the classroom has to be to allow different texts to exist side-by-side, each with something valuable and unique to offer, thus helping students to develop critical literacy via the ability to discern the appropriateness of different media and formats to achieve a particular purpose.

Finally, in overcoming negative perceptions regarding comics, it may also help students to know that comics aren't new; that they have been around for thousands of years. Think about it... Egyptian hieroglyphics, Mayan temple

paintings, reliefs chiselled on Roman columns, scenes on the Bayeux tapestry, and Aboriginal rock paintings are all examples of juxtaposed, sequential art.

### **BUILDING A VISUAL GRAMMAR**

Once we make the decision to include graphic novels, or any image-based texts, into our classrooms, we should not assume that students are fully equipped to consume and produce such texts. According to Schirato and Webb (2004) “looking and seeing... are neither straightforward nor natural - and they are far from universal” (p.2). Individuals see things differently based on their knowledge and skills drawn from past experiences. So for teachers to effectively help students to achieve the full range of potential benefits offered through graphic novels, we need to ensure that our students (and ourselves) are functionally literate in the format. We spend years helping our students become literate in the written word, and the same care and attention should be given to the development of knowledge and skills in relation to reading images. Students need a visual grammar when working with image-based texts such as graphic novels.

Providing students with a grammar to interact with texts is a process referred to by Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) as *frontloading*. Frontloading may activate knowledge and skills that students already possess, or build knowledge and skills which students will need to successfully read a text. It provides students with a framework in which they can deal with new concepts and strategies throughout their interaction with a text.

In working with graphic novels in the classroom, frontloading involves ensuring students are functionally literate in the comics medium by introducing them to the visual grammar of comics—the *codes* and *conventions*. Codes are systems of signs constructed to convey meaning, whilst conventions are long-accepted ways of doing things that arise when audiences are repeatedly exposed to, and become familiar with, a particular way of doing something.

This early stage of exploring a comics grammar need not be done with graphic novels - comic books, photocopies of a page from a comic book or graphic novel, or online comics will suffice. The value of the graphic novel per se will come later when: teachers are looking to facilitate learning beyond functional literacy; access to a greater range of genres is desired; greater complexity of narrative is sought, or when a traditional word-text is being paired with its graphic novel adaptation.

### **CODES AND CONVENTIONS OF COMICS**

The first thing that needs to be covered with students is the reading convention for comics. On a page with consistently sized panels, the reading path will be familiar to students as it follows the traditional left-to-right, top-to-bottom sequence that is used to read a word text. However, regularly sized panels are not always used in graphic novels, thus making the reading path less obvious. The situation is even more complicated if we introduce students to manga that assumes a very different reading path to Western comics. Interestingly, with the increased popularity of manga in countries such as Australia and the United

States, some publishers are choosing to publish manga in the Western left-to-right format.

Using a couple of carefully selected pages from a graphic novel, many of the major codes of comics can be explored. Have the students work in pairs to identify as many of these as possible and then share them with the class through discussion or worksheet. It's quite likely that students will be able to identify major codes such as panels, gutters, narration boxes, speech and thought balloons, motion lines, and sounds (conveyed through onomatopoeia). However, if you look at Katie Monnin's (2010) book that I recommended earlier, you'll see that there are different types of panels, different types of gutters and different types of balloons. Considerable time, therefore, could be spent teasing out the nuances of each of these codes. For example, in terms of the 3 types of content panel, students might be asked to retell the story using only the words, or just the images or a combination of words and images. Try whitening out the words in the speech balloons and have students write their own. Students might also be asked to "tell the story" in the gutters. Monnin's book provides templates to guide such activities. Students should also be made aware of how panels are composed in terms of: the artistic style used (is it cartoonish, realistic etc.), the use of line, shape and colour in both words and image, and the use of vectors (lines that focus our attention).

The mention of gutters highlights what is perhaps the most important code of comics. And it's this code that provides the main defence against claims that the use of images takes away the need for one's imagination in the act of reading comics. *Closure* is the meaning we construct in the blank spaces between panels; it is what is not seen—hence McCloud's (1993) description of comics as the invisible art. Closure is the act of viewing the parts, but seeing the whole. For example, in a panel where we see only the top part of a man, we finish the image by imagining that there is a body to go with what we can see. How we "close" the image, or see the unseen, however, is up to our imagination and may differ from how other readers complete the image. Closure also operates from panel to panel, where the reader becomes what McCloud calls the "silent accomplice". As McCloud points out, the reader must make the connection between the panels. If for example a panel shows a man wielding an axe and the next panel shows a city skyline and a loud scream, it is the reader who decides if the axe has fallen and upon whom. As you can see, playing in the gutters can provide a wonderful stimulus for creative writing.

Whilst it's important to have students look at comics codes and conventions individually, it's also vital to emphasize how, in well-constructed comics, they work together to steer the reader towards understanding. Terry Thompson (2008) calls the synergy of words and images in comics, a "literary ballet", whilst Scott McCloud (1993) also sees comics in dance terms where:

*words and pictures are like partners in dance and each one takes turns leading. When both partners try to lead, the competition can subvert the overall goals... but when these partners know their roles and support each other's strengths, comics can match any of the art forms it draws so much of its strength from (p.156).*

It's certainly worth taking students through an example of this dance partnership. Obviously you wouldn't labour the exercise because students will quickly pick up clues in their reading and, if they take the wrong track, it's an easy matter to go back and take an alternate one. As a one-off exercise, however, it's valuable to show students the importance of looking closely for clues, and also to demonstrate the intentionality of comics creators behind the composition of panels and pages.

### **GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THE CLASSROOM**

With some frontloading and a visual grammar for comics under our belt, I'd now like to consider how we might use graphic novels in the classroom. As a teacher librarian, I've included graphic novels in our library because they're relevant and engaging. For classroom teachers, however, there needs to be more. And there is!

Graphic novels have the power to engage a generation born and raised on visual media—they aren't called the Eye Generation for nothing. With their combination of words and images, they provide the link between the "old" literacy of the classroom, which requires the reading of large passages of words on the printed page in a linear sequence, and the "new" literacies of students' lifeworlds that require analysing and synthesizing multiple streams of simultaneous information delivered in a variety of modes.

#### **Graphic novels cater for different learning styles**

For students with strength in *linguistic intelligence*, graphic novels can fuel imaginations through the rich vocabularies and scenarios created by word choice and word placement in the panels. Have students find and look-up the meanings for all the words that might be new to them and challenge students to create the narrative between the panels, i.e. in the gutters.

For visual learners strong in *spatial intelligence*—those who think in images and are sensitive to colour, line, shape, form, space and the relationships that exist between these elements—the vibrant and evocative images of graphic novels can be engaging. This appeal helps explain the popularity of graphic novels amongst boys, whom research indicates have a proclivity for spatial intelligence.

Students who communicate well and understand others' feelings and motives are described as being strong in *interpersonal intelligence*. These students can read the nonverbal facial and body cues of others and have strong intuitions. Again, the graphic novel is attractive because much of the storytelling is communicated visually through facial expressions, settings, lines and shadings. These students will enjoy activities such as taking a section of a graphic novel where you have whited-out the words and using the relationships, facial expressions etc. to create their own dialogue.

#### **Graphic novels cater for all reading abilities**

There is a tremendous range of graphic novels to cater for all reading abilities. Alternatively, because graphic novels are *polysemic*, or multi-layered, the same graphic novel can be read at different levels. This means that word-texts that might be otherwise considered academically inaccessible for students can be introduced into the classroom as a graphic novel. There are many examples of graphic adaptations of “difficult texts” For example, the works of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan-Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are available as graphic novels. There’s also a graphic novel version of the Bible. And then there’s *Beowulf*, which we’ll have a quick look at here in more detail.

*Beowulf* is an example of a text that in its traditional form would certainly be inaccessible to many. The graphic novel version, however, can change that. At a basic level, students might read *Beowulf* as a stand-alone text without any background knowledge and enjoy a story of heroes and monsters – the same themes they can find in modern superhero stories. Alternatively, students might read *Beowulf* more deeply with the knowledge that it is an adaptation of the 11th Century Anglo Saxon epic poem, and one of the earliest examples of English literature. In doing so they might develop critical literacy skills through consideration of aspects such as the place of the quintessential hero in literature, the historical accuracy of the content, the poem’s Christian perspective, and the text as an adaptation. With their interest sparked, some students might even go on to consider written translations of this Old English poem.

In our school library, graphic novel versions of Shakespeare have definitely increased accessibility to difficult texts and it’s not uncommon to see middle school boys enjoying Shakespeare in this format. As one of my students said, a graphic novel of Shakespeare is so much better than the word version, because Shakespeare wrote his plays to be seen, not read.

Speaking of Shakespeare, the capacity for graphic novels to cater for all learning abilities is well-reflected in the recent publications by Classical Comics. Each play is provided in three different versions, all with identical images, but with different word-text. There’s also a useful Teachers’ Guide with activity templates. Also available from Classical Comics are *Romeo & Juliet*, *Henry V*, *The Tempest*, *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Great Expectations*, and *A Christmas Carol*.

### **Graphic novels enhance poor and reluctant readers**

Perhaps one of the most recognized benefits for students of reading comics is that of supporting those who either don’t have functional linguistic literacy skills or who are reluctant to use them. Research indicates that the provision of images reduces students’ frustration in the decoding of alphabetic text, and allows the student to concentrate on the application of more complex thinking skills (Hibbing an& Rankin-Erickson, 2009).

Unfortunately, the use of graphic novels and comic books for this purpose has proved a double-edged sword by reinforcing the notion that comics are for small children and those who can’t read.



### **Graphic novels can enhance understanding of popular culture and other media**

Graphic novels react to social and cultural changes swiftly, often in advance of other media and, according to Gretchen Schwarz (2002) often “present alternative views of culture, history, and human life”. For example, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, whilst movie studios pulled films that might be “too sensitive”, the first graphic novel was published within a month.

By including graphic novels in the curriculum, students are able to link their in-school reading with their contemporary lifestyles and values. In other words, their learning becomes meaningful. Many of the skills that students develop to be able to consume and respond to graphic novels are skills that can be transferred to other media such as film and computer gaming, and vice versa.

### **Comics can foster reading across genres**

Comics can help students read across a range of genres. The same genres found in traditional print literature exist in graphic novels and the days of associating comics with superheroes are over, or at least should be. Graphic novels can stimulate interest in all types of fiction and non fiction. Of course, the rise in the popularity of non-fiction graphic novels lends weight to the argument that the term “graphic novels” is a misnomer.

A currently popular genre in graphic novels is war-journalism, and a good example is *The Photographer*. Created in 1986 and focused on the conflict between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, this graphic novel documents Didier Lefevre’s arduous and dangerous journey through Afghanistan accompanying the Doctors Without Borders. The graphic novel combines some of the 4000 photographs taken by Lefevre with the artwork of Emmanuel Guibert. It was originally published in France, where it sold some 250 000 copies.

### **Graphic novels explore personal and social issues**

Many graphic novels tackle difficult topics of the human experience and therefore can be useful for exploring personal and social issues. They address themes that can be important to young people, such as acceptance, nonconformity, prejudice, social injustice, coming of age, triumph over adversity and personal growth. *Ultimate Spiderman: Power and responsibility*, for example, is a coming of age story. Students easily relate to Peter Parker as the “moody teen” who undergoes changes in attitude, behaviour and physical appearance after being bitten by a radioactive spider. The theme of *Ultimate Spiderman #1* centres on the mantra “with great power comes great responsibility” and provides a solid foundation for the discussion of leadership and responsibility.

*Cancer Vixen* is Melissa Marchetta’s biographical account of her journey after being diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 43. Taking a humorous approach to her experience, Marchetta not only provides an insight into the emotional roller coaster she embarked on during her illness, but also goes into significant detail of her treatment. Whilst useful for individual students wanting more information about cancer, this graphic novel could also be included in

subject programs where students study diseases or human responses to adversity.

David B's *Epileptic* is an emotionally charged autobiography about growing up with an epileptic brother. Intertwined with the harrowing story of how the family tries to cope with Jean-Christopher's illness is a fascinating narrative of David B's family history.

*Tyranny*(2011) by Lesley Fairfield is a stark portrayal of a young woman's struggle with anorexia. Fairfield draws on her own experiences of an eating disorder to give a powerful and candid story of hope and survival.

A few more graphic novels that are excellent vehicles for the study of contemporary social and political issues include:

Ted Rall's *Afghanistan and back*, and Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde* - two more examples of war-journalism.

*Pride* is based on the true story of a pride of lions that escaped from Baghdad Zoo in 2003 during the US bombing of Iraq and questions the notion of freedom.

*Marvel 1602* was written as a postmodern response to 9/11. The winner of several awards, *Marvel 1602* follows the journey of a group of non-conformists who are sent from Elizabethan England to help colonise the New World.

*Deogratias* gives an account of genocide in Rwanda.

*Persepolis* is Marjane Satrapi's autobiography of her early years in Tehran and her experiences while she studied in Austria before returning to Iran following the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Whilst providing an insightful portrait of daily life in post-revolution Iran, Satrapi also provides the reader with a fascinating history of her country and the impact of its repressive ruling regime.

The study of *Persepolis* provides a rich opportunity for the development of critical and cultural literacies in students. Students might first consider, for example, the black and white drawings, which hint to the fact that David B, author of *Epileptic*, was Marjane's teacher and mentor. Beyond that, however, students might consider how the drawings reflect a story told through child's eyes, or the fact everything in Iran was black and white – there was no room for people to vacillate with their affiliations under such a repressive regime. And then there's the possibility that black is the public colour of women in Iran. The theme of the repression of women is a constant throughout *Persepolis* and is represented in many of Satrapi's images.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* is perhaps the most well-known and popular graphic novel to be used in schools. In a combination of fiction and non-fiction that took over thirteen years to produce, Spiegelman explores the experiences of his parents during the Holocaust, their liberation from Auschwitz and their journey to reside in the United States. Layered over this narrative is a second narrative –

the author's story of how he came to write the book and his troubled relationship with his father.

As well as offering opportunities to study the history of the Holocaust, *Maus* is brimming with opportunities for facilitating critical literacy, and for teaching literary techniques. Just on this single page of *Maus* we can see use of symbols, anthropomorphism, and postmodern techniques such as bricolage (using the author's cultural artefacts such as maps to construct the text). Elsewhere in the text there are wonderful examples of intertextuality, textual self-awareness and self-referencing.

*Maus* is also an excellent example of the polysemic nature of graphic novels whereby the creation of multiple layers of narrative allow the text to be read on a number of levels. The more one looks, the more one finds. Take this page for example. In the first four panels we see Spiegelman sitting at his desk (no longer a mouse, but a human with a mouse mask which suggests his struggle to remain detached from the horrors he writes about. This struggle is reinforced the pairing of objective statements about his parents and the Holocaust with emotive images of death. He is also surrounded by flies ( a play on the chapter's title). But the real reason for the flies is not obvious until the large panel at the bottom of the page, reveals a large pile of corpses. Outside the window are the wire and guard tower of Auschwitz. It was only on a recent re-reading that I noticed the barely visible large swastika that runs through the panels. What more can I find? During the 1990s, *Maus* won a number of international awards, including the Pulitzer Prize. Such a dense text – hardly something that could be described as sub-literature intended for children or the struggling reader.

For a paired reading with *Maus*, History and English students might look at Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz*. Beginning in the brutal ethnic war of 1993 in Bosnia, an old couple have sought refuge in a bombed-out building. Reflecting on their distant past whilst there, the old man scratches the word *zamor*–remember– into a wall; an act that immediately transports the couple to their arrival by cattle car at Auschwitz.

At the back of *Auschwitz*, there are ten pages of "Background Information". During the five years it took Croci to write *Auschwitz*, he interviewed some thirteen Holocaust survivors, conducted extensive research and relied on further documentary testimony. Even though the story itself is fictional, every detail and event originated from documented witnesses of Auschwitz.

### **Graphic novels can be used to teach content**

Here are some science and mathematics graphic novels that might be used to teach content in an engaging manner.

*The periodic table of comics* is a website and not a graphic novel, but draws on the comics medium to teach the periodic table. For example, if one clicks on Fe (iron), a number of comics pages in which iron is featured are brought up. A useful activity for students might be to determine whether the comic books use of the element is fact or fiction.

### **Do graphic novels facilitate learning?**

We could continue to view example after example of graphic novels that can be used to facilitate teaching and learning. But how do we know that students are learning anything through the use of graphic novels? One way is to have students engage in *performances of understanding* by creating their own comics scenes. There are a number of free comic creator programs on the Net for the artistically challenged and these are listed on my website. However, as you'll see here in some of my students' efforts associated with their study of the graphic novel *The Hobbit*, coloured pencils are still alive and well. Apart from demonstrating a good understanding of comics codes and conventions, the obvious time and effort put into these examples are testament of the boys' engagement in the activity.

Here's another way to create comics scenes. Chris Howarth, creator of *The Brick Side*, an online comic strip, uses Lego. Likewise, students could use clay or figurines; take photos; drop them into PowerPoint and add speech balloons and thought bubbles.

In conclusion, I hope this workshop has helped demonstrate the appropriateness of using graphic novels in the classroom, and has offered some texts and strategies to enable you to put theory into practice. If you're interested, please have a look at the website I mentioned at the outset because many of the resources there have practical tips to share. If you're not interested, then please consider that your students probably will be, and ask yourself "Do I have a choice?" And then lean on Marjane Satrapi for some guidance. Reading graphic novels, says Satrapi (in Cooke, 2006), "it's like opera: you have to go a couple of times to appreciate it".

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