

# literacy

## GOING GRAPHIC: USING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS TO BOOST THE LITERACY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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### Project Coordinator

- Larry Swartz: Coordinator of Central elementary cohort, OISE

### Project Partners

- Sixty-three primary-junior teacher candidates from the 2007/2008 Central cohort
- Sixty-three associate teachers from the Central cohort, within either the Toronto District School Board or the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

### Abstract

An important initiative of the 2007/2008 OISE Initial Teacher Education program in the Central elementary cohort was to support English Language Learners (ELLs) in every classroom. This project, Going Graphic, was designed to help teacher candidates consider ways to use comics and graphic novels to boost literacy among ELLs during their practicum experiences. As part of their language arts course in OISE's Central cohort, teacher candidates were introduced to a wide range of graphic texts, including comics, graphic novels, and picture books. The purpose was to demonstrate how these popular works are significant in encouraging many readers to engage with texts. Attention was given to how verbal and visual texts work together to help readers make meaning. Teacher candidates were also introduced to several response strategies to enrich comprehension. The language arts course work also included an opportunity for teacher candidates to plan and develop lessons using graphic texts and to gather data for consideration when using such texts for guided, shared, or independent reading. As a result of this project, teacher candidates were excited to teach with graphic texts, which they found were an engaging medium to support literacy instruction. They also found that the texts they used and the strategies they introduced—whether working with individuals, small groups, or the whole class—motivated students to read, write, and talk. Another beneficial outcome was that the ELLs were able to communicate their thoughts in response to verbal and written texts.

## Project Focus

- How can comics and graphic texts extend the vocabulary growth and language development of English Language Learners (ELLs)?
- How might teachers be encouraged to use comics and graphic texts in their programs to engage at-risk readers, reluctant readers, and also proficient readers?
- How can this research inquiry project help teacher candidates to become reflective about best practices and differentiated instruction as they plan lessons to implement curriculum expectations in language arts?

*By incorporating the graphic novel into school literacy programs, educators will be recognizing students' reading choices outside school and completing them with the texts mandated inside school.* —David Booth and Kathleen Gould Lundy, *In Graphic Detail*

*Many everyday classroom activities and assignments can be adapted—and enriched—by allowing students to approach them using more than one language. Inviting students to use their first language as well as English enables them to draw on their strengths, including their existing academic, linguistic and cultural knowledge.*

—Ontario Ministry of Education, *Many Roots, Many Voices*

In a world full of visuals from television, DVDs, video games, and computers, it is not surprising that young people today enjoy reading books presented in a comic book format. The graphic novel offers an alternative to the traditional texts used in schools, and it is a new medium to promote literacy development. Multimodal texts, such as comics, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, email, graphics, audio recordings and videos, are the media of “new literacies.” Together, these new kinds of texts fill the lives of students, and students discover meaning as they combine the messages from different media into their own construct of the world. In the past few years the world of education has experienced an explosion of interest in the use of graphic texts—also known as *graphica*—in the classroom. Recently, publishers of children’s literature have begun to produce *graphica*, making the genre more available to elementary students. Despite this, many language arts teachers seem reluctant and unsure of the suitability and function of the comic format in their instructional repertoire. A negative perception of this genre leads to a reluctance on the part of teachers to introduce graphic texts into the classroom; this attitude stems from misconceptions or misinformation about this popular text form. The purpose of this project was to both challenge and support the understanding that teachers have about the use of comics and graphic novels as instructional strategies for literacy development.

The effectiveness of graphic texts for creating proficient readers is directly related to the way that graphic novels are constructed. The pictures not only support the text but are also part of the text. The written words themselves are artistically placed and drawn to enhance the reader’s capability in making meaning. Readers, including ELLs, are therefore given context clues within the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, expressions, symbols, and actions of the characters in the story. Vocabulary development is also supported by means of the illustrations and text.

*Using comics in the educational framework of literacy development offers numerous occasions to address issues of comprehension, fluency, content-area learning, vocabulary development, and wide reading. The graphic novel format offers high-interest reading to many at-risk and reluctant readers, who usually shun traditional texts, as well as to proficient readers, who search for an engaging genre. Graphic texts are particularly helpful for ELLs. The visual messages placed alongside the minimal printed text remove some of the blocks that frustrate struggling readers who are attempting to comprehend the text and process the story.*

The intention of this project was to enable educators to see the potential of using graphica to enrich comprehension and to motivate readers to become engaged with an accessible art form.

## Stages of the Project

### **Introducing the topic of graphic text use in the classrooms**

Elementary teacher candidates at OISE were introduced to current research and professional texts that support the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom. A first semester introductory session provided teacher candidates with the history and background of graphica, visual and verbal formats that distinguish graphic texts, and a small library of graphic literature, including comic stories, picture books, novels, and non-fiction texts. An elementary associate teacher from York District School Board, who had already created a study unit that focused on graphic texts, presented a workshop in which she provided teacher candidates with sample graphic work that had been created by her students. A second semester workshop provided model lessons on how graphic texts can be used to teach comprehension. A demonstration was given on teaching techniques, including Readers Theatre, improvisation, and the designing of graphic texts. Teacher candidates also received a handout outlining ten ways to use graphic texts and a bibliography of graphic picture books and novels.

### **Pursuing inquiry projects**

As part of their course work in language arts, each of the teacher candidates in the Central cohort was required to embark on an inquiry project with graphic texts as the assigned topic. Teacher candidates were challenged to gather and analyze data and become involved with case studies of ELLs. As course instructor, I presented the rationale for using graphic texts to support ELLs and also outlined the stages of conducting research during the practicum. The teacher candidates gained an understanding of the policy, philosophy, and practice with ELLs through reading and discussing *Many Roots, Many Voices* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). At this stage, each teacher candidate received a *Boldprint* anthology (Booth, 2007) that was appropriate for the grade level they would be teaching. Each of these books features a comic story, which could be a resource for use during the practicum. Several teacher candidates also purchased graphic texts; the most popular was *The Arrival*, a wordless picture book by Shaun Tan (2007), and *The Invention of Hugo Cabaret* by Brian Selznick (2007).

### **Implementation in the classrooms**

During the second practicum, teacher candidates worked with ELLs from junior kindergarten through to grade six. Each teacher candidate planned at least one lesson using a graphic text, appropriate for the grade level, as a resource. Some chose to focus on a lesson that involved working one-on-one with ELLs. Others provided lessons to the whole class and observed the ELLs and their

work. Teacher candidates conducted their inquiry projects by gathering data such as transcripts of conversations with students, graphic texts made by students, artwork, writing samples, or anecdotal observations.

Three projects serve as examples of what took place in the different classrooms. In a grade five classroom in an inner city school, one teacher candidate developed activities that integrated language arts and visual arts with a social studies strand on ancient civilizations. Her students read a number of myths and were asked to retell the story in a graphic story format. She provided literature models as well as a demonstration of the features of graphic texts to help the students complete their projects.

A second teacher candidate, working one-on-one with ELLs in a kindergarten setting, provided several pictures she had drawn and invited each child to arrange the pictures in an order and tell a story by using the illustrations as sources. She tape-recorded and transcribed the children's conversations, and then she reflected on their use of vocabulary, their communication skills, and their ability to invent a story.

A third teacher candidate, in a grade six classroom, used the Internet and introduced students to a software program called Comic Life. She developed a unit for students to work in groups and go through the process of producing a graphic text. The students planned and developed stories, took digital photographs, and worked with the computer program to create their own Comic Life publications. The ELLs were part of the group, and the teacher candidate observed and assessed their participation as they solved problems and helped their friends complete the project.

### **Sharing the findings**

Teacher candidates reflected on their experiences and completed a written report of their inquiry project, which included an introduction and sections on methodology, data collection and analysis, and implications. Two key questions framed the final reflections: What did you learn about using graphic texts? What did you learn about English Language Learners as they engaged with the text and communicated their ideas in response to the text? In the final session of the project, teacher candidates shared their findings. First they each discussed their inquiry project with a partner and then they participated in a small group, describing their inquiry and presenting their data and findings.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data for the Going Graphic project included teacher candidate case studies, lesson plans, and their reflections on implications for future teaching. As well as using such methods as observation, transcripts of conversations, and written and art work by the students, several teacher candidates carried out a survey or an interview to learn about students' reactions to reading graphic texts. To determine the impact of the instruction on literacy growth, teacher candidates considered students' ability to (a) communicate ideas orally, (b) retell and tell stories, (c) use vocabulary specific to the text, (d) interpret visual cues, (e) engage with graphic texts over a period of time, and (f) follow instructions.

The teacher candidates gathered and analyzed data concerning the use of graphic novels in the primary or junior program. This activity provided a significant context for them to understand how graphic texts can help readers make meaning. In partnership with their associate teachers, the teacher candidates focused on the literacy development of ELLs. They considered resources and strategies

that combine pictures and words to help ELLs develop new vocabulary, practise language skills, and understand how stories work.

From the data collectively gathered and presented by the teacher candidates, it was evident that ELLs successfully used verbal and visual texts to make meaning. The illustrations provided significant cues to help students use their prior knowledge and experience to talk about the text. The sources introduced by the teacher candidates helped ELLs to identify main ideas, use vocabulary appropriate to the text, and raise questions about the text. Oral and written response activities invited students to communicate ideas and reveal their comprehension.

One of the central themes that the teacher candidates considered was motivation. Both primary and junior learners were very engaged with the content and format of the graphic literature offered to them. They willingly spent a period of time with the text, often revisiting the words and pictures. Following the activities that the teacher candidates introduced, many students returned to the literature to read independently, and many chose to read other graphic texts independently.

## Impact

As project coordinator and initial teacher education instructor at OISE, I gained an opportunity to pay close attention to programming as it relates to literacy learning and ELLs. As I gathered resources and contemplated meaningful literacy instruction for engaging readers and enriching their comprehension, I gained valuable classroom experience and data to share with the Central cohort community, OISE colleagues, and other associate teachers. The goals of the project and its content helped me provide support to the teacher candidates on their journeys as teachers and researchers. Following are several key impacts that resulted from the experiences of the participants in this project.

### **Teacher candidates in the Central cohort**

This project helped teacher candidates embark on an inquiry project that was a component of their Teacher Education Seminar (TES). Through discussions with their associate teachers, cohort colleagues, and course instructors, the teacher candidates had opportunities to consider how ELLs can develop comprehension, vocabulary, and communication skills by using strategies that can help these students respond to comics and graphic novels. Because the teacher candidates were well prepared with resources and strategies to use in their practice, they were empowered to use graphic texts in their teachings.

The majority of the teacher candidates agreed that they had a new understanding of the graphic text format. Their work with ELLs also helped them understand that to enhance comprehension it is important for these students to have visuals to accompany verbal texts. Nearly every teacher candidate described the success they had experienced with this project and their intention to use graphic texts in their future teaching. Following are comments by four of the teacher candidates:

I felt that this inquiry brought me closer to the learning profiles of individual students. I learned more about the specific nature of their difficulties with language, but I also saw what strengths and abilities they had and how graphic texts helped me to tap into their knowledge and skills.

Before conducting this inquiry, I was hesitant to use graphic novels in the classroom. Upon completion my opinion has completely turned around. The visual images in graphic novels transcend language and serve as a powerful tool for scaffolding vocabulary growth and meaning making. Having graphic texts in the classroom is an easy way to make reading more accessible to ELL students, as they are often familiar with the format in their own language and can use illustrations to infer meaning.

Thank you for introducing me to graphic texts. I never thought that this was something I would be interested in and I can't wait to do more graphic "stuff" in the future.

I believe that if graphic texts or graphic novels are that motivational, then every teacher should use them. Excited and motivated students learn more and remember more and who doesn't want a class full of excited and motivated learners?

### **Associate teachers**

This project addressed OISE's Initial Teacher Education program principle of strengthening school/university partnerships, since it directly linked the initiatives of the program with teaching practices in the schools. Teacher candidates and their associate teachers built a partnership as they developed lessons and reflected on their learning. The project strengthened the collaboration between teacher candidates and OISE's associate teachers, who learned about a variety of resources and strategies that they could use to build their repertoire of literacy instruction. For example, when teacher candidates demonstrated in the classrooms the potential for engaging students, many associate teachers, for whom graphic texts were a new kind of resource, realized they could also use comics and graphic novels in their future programming. Even for teachers who were unfamiliar with (or reluctant to use) graphic texts for literacy development, the project seemed to provide evidence that successful reading, writing, and talk can be promoted by using such texts, especially because they appeal to the diverse needs and abilities of their students.

An associate teacher in a grade one class commented on how well the graphic-style picture books used by her teacher candidate helped her children "read illustrations and words together: The children were really excited about getting their hands on these books." A junior teacher in another class was impressed with the quality of the students' work when they prepared their own comic stories, and he told his teacher candidate that, as a consequence, he hoped to do a more in-depth study on the use of graphic novels in his program. In another class, where students worked collaboratively to create their own graphic version of a novel, and each produced one comic strip page for the class publication, the associate teacher said, "I think this is the first time the students really looked carefully at the author's words. Because they had to use the dialogue from the novel for their own comic strips, they really thought carefully about what the characters said."

### **Students in the classrooms, kindergarten through grade six**

Developing the habit of reading is an important catalyst for improving literacy. By exposing young learners to texts that appeal to their interests and tastes, educators can help them develop a habit of reading. The popularity of graphic novels in itself facilitates this process. Ultimately, the project benefited the children in the classrooms by motivating them to read and respond to comics, graphic novels, and non-fiction texts. Through activities that involved discussion, questioning, reading aloud,

and writing, the students used strategies for reading growth and gained a greater understanding of the English language.

### **Broader educational context**

The project supported the goal of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to ensure that by the age of 12 all students attain a high level of literacy, numeracy, and comprehension. The process used in the Going Graphic project encouraged teachers to develop a model of inquiry that can inform their practice. The research process, including data collection and analysis, can strengthen educators' literacy practice for the twenty-first century.

## **Implications for Teacher Education**

All the teacher candidates responded enthusiastically to this inquiry project. Their written reflections described how excited they were about using graphics, how impressed they were with the engagement of the students in the learning activities that they had introduced, and how the research gave them a meaningful context for considering the strengths and challenges of working with ELLs. Not only did this project provide a context for teacher candidates to conduct research as part of the Elementary Language Arts program in the Central cohort, it also allowed them to address differentiated instruction that promotes success for a wide range of learners, including ELLs. This research helped build collaborative school/university partnerships because it linked the initiatives of OISE's Initial Teacher Education program directly with teaching practice in the schools, and teacher candidates and associate teachers worked together to develop lessons that involved reading, writing, and talk. The nature of the project promoted the mentoring of teacher candidates by associate teachers through demonstration and modelling. Associate teachers also learned new instructional strategies. The professional development and dialogue that emerged from this project helped associate teachers and teacher candidates reflect on their practice and take specific actions to enrich their programs.

### **Challenges encountered**

Although the project met its core goals, there were some challenges in the process both for the project coordinator and for the teacher candidates. When the topic of graphic novels was introduced to teacher candidates, the goals needed to be more clearly outlined. Even though comics and graphic novels are not a new cultural phenomenon, the teacher candidates had difficulty understanding and accepting the rationale for using graphic texts in the instructional program. Also, when teacher candidates embarked on their inquiry projects, they needed to be well prepared for gathering resources and learning strategies for using these resources. As instructor, it was challenging for me not only to present this information in a way that would help them understand the purpose and the process but also to demonstrate activities that teacher candidates could implement or adapt.

For the teacher candidates, there was an added demand to conduct their investigations within the short time period of the practicum. Some were able to extend the duration of the lessons. Others chose to isolate the ELLs and conduct the inquiry one-on-one. Integrating the lessons, sustaining the work of graphic text unit over a period of time, and balancing other expectations for teaching during the practicum remain a challenge, particularly when a focused inquiry project such as this one is mandated. Another issue was the fact that, although teacher candidates were free to choose resources, develop strategies, and gather data, the research project, as an assignment, did not give the

teacher candidates choice in the overall topic. In this respect, this inquiry project had both positive and limiting implications.

## Practical Applications

The following classroom activities and events can be used to promote student learning with graphic texts:

- Students can prepare a Readers Theatre presentation based on a graphic text. Roles can be assigned for each of the characters that appear in the story. One or more readers can take the narrator role.
- Students can create their own graphic texts, transforming a picture book or novel into a comic strip. Provide the students with a template with four to six panels. Students can use the dialogue from the story to create dialogue balloons. It is not necessary for students to retell the whole story.
- Comic strip panels can be cut up, and students can work alone or with a partner to arrange the panels in sequential order. To begin, students might use a simple four-panel comic. Longer comic stories can also be used for this activity.
- Students can dramatize a graphic story. In groups, students can create still images using their bodies to represent parts of a graphic story. As an extension, students can create an improvised scene by role-playing the characters featured in the graphic text.
- A page of graphic text can be used for a shared reading lesson. Students can identify the different speech bubbles, the use of narration, the perspective of the illustrations, etc. Students can discuss how effective the illustrations are in giving information. Does the verbal text give as much information as the visual images? What scenes might be added to the graphic text?
- After students have read a graphic story independently, invite them to retell the story in their own words. Notice how successful they are at discussing plot, character, setting, or conflict.

## Next Steps

This project provided opportunity for a group of educators to consider issues related to supporting ELLs, and it confirmed the need to implement a variety of strategies to build communication and comprehension skills. Since the use of graphic texts proved to successfully engage these students, a number of questions have emerged: How can a range of graphic resources be included throughout the curriculum to boost literacy among ELLs? How can verbal and written graphic texts be better deconstructed so as to enrich reading comprehension strategies for all students, including ELLs who are at-risk students and others who are proficient readers?

The topic of graphic texts will be included in future language arts classes at OISE. Samples of graphic texts, data collection and analysis, and reflections of the teacher candidates will be presented to other language arts instructors and in workshops throughout Ontario. The results of this project have been presented at the International Reading Association conference in 2008, and will be presented again at the 2009 conference to be held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Additional opportunities for presentation

in Ontario include the “Reading for the Love of It” conference in February 2009 and the Council of Drama Educators conference in October 2009. Ultimately, evidence of the application of this inquiry will be found in future classrooms of the teacher candidates.

As a result of one inquiry project in which a teacher candidate helped students transform a text into graphic format and create a class graphic novel, a film called *Going Graphic* was produced, and this will be screened at future language arts conferences and professional development sessions. Three other teacher candidates plan to prepare an article for publication outlining the procedures they used and the learning that resulted from their inquiry projects, which used the Comic Life computer programming to help special education students design their own graphic texts.

For those who choose to use graphic novels in their programs, or invite students to create their own graphic texts, or observe and assess the students’ comprehension in their response to graphic texts, this project will have made a positive contribution. Whenever these teacher candidates or associate teachers invite ELLs to read graphic texts and communicate their thinking through talk, writing, or the arts, they will have spread the seeds of *Going Graphic*.

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