Introduction

Why Teach Graphic Novels in ELA? And Why Now?

After I finished speaking about graphic novels at the 2008 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) annual conference, a middle school teacher said the following:

"I get it. I do. Graphic novels get kids motivated to read. During SSR [sustained silent reading] most kids have one. But the reality is that I have to teach my curriculum. I have to teach 'real' literature."

On another occasion, a graduate student in an advanced literacy course said:

"I can totally see the story in the pictures, Katie. I'm with you. My kids love 'em. They have 'em. But how can I say that the graphic novel is literature and goes with what I have to teach?"

Whether a statement or a question, the point is the same: Despite the ELA teacher's enthusiasm for and interest in the graphic novel, and that of their students, the applicability of the graphic novel to ELA teaching and learning is currently in question.

The Purpose of This Book

The exciting and passionate intention of *Teaching Graphic Novels* is to respond to this concern, and, in doing so, offer ELA teachers classroom-based and curriculum-aligned lesson ideas for teaching the graphic novel in their secondary ELA classrooms—both in terms of reading and writing.

Thus, the guiding question for *Teaching Graphic Novels* is: How can secondary ELA educators teach their stated curriculum with graphic novels?

To answer this question, this book will begin with a discussion about what it means to be literate during the greatest communication revolution of all time (Kress, 2003). During our current communication revolution, the worlds of print-text literacy and image literacy share the stage (Buckingham, 2003; Kress, 2003; The New London Group, 1996). They are co-stars. They are partners.

To help us better visualize our modern literacy climate, let's imagine a stage with two actors upon it. Both stand mid-stage, dressed the same, ready to take on their roles. The one actor—let's call him "Print-text"—will be voicing his lines in words. He has always been the star, the veteran entertainer. The other actor—"Image-text"—is the new guy, and he will be acting out his message visually. They will both be given equal amounts of space and time on the stage. And they will each tell the story. Both will communicate meaning, yet they will do so in their own unique formats, sometimes standing alone, sometimes standing together.

Because of this new, shared literacy stage, today's ELA teachers have the good fortune to be living and teaching during what seems like the most exciting time in the history of ELA teaching and learning. We are the teachers who will redefine what counts as valuable literature, and literacy, for generations to come. What we do with the relationship between print-text literacies and image literacies has never before been attempted. This opportunity is more than exciting and more than seismic to the future of ELA.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized into two major sections. The first section, which starts with the Introduction, begins by offering a brief, historical explanation about the significance of teaching modern ELA students to read and write with both print-text literacies and image literacies. Chapter 1 then continues this conversation by explaining graphic novel terminology.

The second section, beginning with Chapter 2, then turns its attention to aligning graphic novels to the ELA curriculum. Specifically, Chapters 2-6 address how to align graphic novels to the following major areas of ELA teaching and learning: reading comprehension, fiction, nonfiction, media literacy, and English language learning.

Each chapter uses the graphic novel vocabulary discussed in Chapter 1. This book also suggests exemplary middle-school- and high-school-level graphic novels for your ELA classrooms. But these are merely suggestions. You are encouraged to expand upon these suggestions. If you would like to share your favorite graphic novel selections, lesson ideas, reading strategies or general thoughts, I invite you to do so on the *Teaching Graphic Novels* blog: http://teachinggraphicnovels.blogspot.com.

I look forward to continued conversations with all of you as we pursue teaching graphic novels together in the following chapters.

What's a Graphic Novel Anyway?

Before we look at how to teach graphic novels in ELA, it might be helpful to have some history on the graphic novel itself and why it should now count as a valuable format of literature in ELA teaching and learning.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, some visionary comic artists (including Jim Steranko and Will Eisner) wanted to respond to society's assumption that comics were juvenile in nature and intended merely for adolescent reading pleasure. These assumptions, they felt, were false and were guided by strong misunderstandings about the supposed linkage between comics and juvenile delinquency. Responding to these misunderstandings, then, comic artists were determined to prove that image literacies could not only appeal to a much larger audience—youth and adult readers alike—but also operate on a serious, literary level (a level worthy of esteemed attention).

In 1978, Eisner wrote and illustrated *A Contract with God*. He called his text a "graphic novel," and popularized the term. Prior to 1978, Steranko had published *Red Tide*.

In terms of ELA teaching and learning, these publications were seismic. They had proven that the graphic novel format could fit alongside the ELA curriculum, deeply exploring issues of characterization, plot, setting, theme, symbols, and so on. And although the comics industry was interested in telling these deeper, more literary-level stories that could be read like traditional literature in ELA classrooms, the early graphic novels merely made a small splash in what was later to become a much bigger pond.

In the late 1980s, this much bigger pond found itself experiencing a wave of excitement with the publication of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus I* (1986), and then, in the early 1990s, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus II* (1991). And even though other significant graphic novels had been published both before *Maus* and after *Maus*, *Maus I* and *Maus II* specifically captured the general public's reading interests (including that of the ELA community). Readers from outside the comics and the graphic novel worlds were reading graphic novels. The graphic novel had made it to the main stage.

"Ok, Katie," you may want to say at this point, "I remember that. I read *Maus I* and *Maus II*. But that was the late 1980s and early 1990s. I see all kinds of graphic novels now. At bookstores. At the library. Everywhere! I never saw them everywhere like this before now. Why now?"

Although there are many reasons for the rise in graphic novel popularity today[1] (the introduction of manga in the U.S., a regeneration of traditional comics, the growing graphic novel readership from around the world, and, perhaps, even the number of movies based on graphic novels), I would like to discuss one specific moment in time as a turning point in my own teaching of ELA.

And although my explanation is personal in nature, it is linked to a moment in time we all share.

The day I realized the significance of teaching students to read and write with both print-text literacies and image literacies was September 11, 2001. I was in my second week of teaching, twenty-four years old, and with thirty seventh-grade ELA students.

The following is an account of about ten seconds of time on that day.

1 It is commonly known among graphic novel readers, creators, and scholars that graphic novels have been popular outside of the U.S. since the mid-1980s.

The principal enters the room and whispers something into my ear.

I stop teaching, move toward the TV, and barely manage to say, "Miss L. has asked me to turn on the television for something important," as the second plane hits the World Trade Center.

On September 11, 2001, the power of images to convey meaning took on a whole new level of significance in classrooms around the world.

And even though it is a bit far-fetched to think that day specifically led to a general social interest in graphic novels, it was on that day that I, personally, realized that most of my students did not know how to understand what they were seeing.

Perhaps it's not related at all, and perhaps it's only a result of my passionate interest in the graphic novel, but I cannot help but note—and point out—that graphic novel sales skyrocketed post 9/11.

At a minimum, it is worthwhile to note that from 2002 onward there has been an increase in the public's desire to read with both print-text literacies and image literacies, such as those found in graphic novels.

Chart 1: The rise in graphic novel sales from 2001–2006

	Total $ Sales of Graphic Novels
2001	$75 million
2002	$130 million
2003	$195 million
2004	$245 million
2005	$295 million
2006	$330 million

Grabois, A. (2007). *Graphic novels*. Retrieved August 20. 2007, from http://www.beneaththecover.com/2007/08/20/graphic-novels/

A Brief History of Teaching Literature in ELA: From a Five-Foot Bookshelf to a Graphic Novel

Over time, ELA teaching and learning has seen a persistent and growing rise in the use of print-text literacies alongside image literacies. Today, that history can be seen to point to the significance of the graphic novel as one of the best vehicles for teaching reading and writing. The following is a concise, brief history of how image literacies have become more and more significant in ELA teaching and learning during the last century.

The rise of image literacies in ELA actually, and ironically, begins in the 1890s, with a man named Charles W. Eliot and his determined focus on print-text literacies. Eliot, president of Harvard University in the 1890s, was the chair of the Committee of Ten, a group composed of education stakeholders who were selected to decide upon a standard ELA curriculum for high school students. In the end, the Committee of Ten decided that students should be required to read what is now seen as "traditional" or "canonical" literature. Eliot even bragged that this literature could all be found on a five-foot-long bookshelf in his office. On the bookshelf: print-text literature written by mostly white, male, British authors. The message was clear: ELA teachers must only teach these print-text literacies by these authors.

In 1911, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) took issue with the committee's recommendations. NCTE suggested and advocated to ELA teachers that they not feel enslaved by the committee's canonical, print-text literacy recommendations but, instead, consider the interests of their students.

In the 1920s and 1930s, basing their beliefs in the work of I.A. Richards (1929) and Louise Rosenblatt (1938), literacy scholars further argued that reader response theory—the idea that, when the reader and the text come together, they create a unique, aesthetic meaning—also serve as an avenue for text selection. Once again, ELA teachers were encouraged to reconsider the Committee of Ten's recommendations. And, in this case, reader response theory suggested that ELA educators be influenced by students as individual readers who could each interpret literature in their own unique ways.

In 1952, two decades after the surge in reader response theory, Dora V. Smith coined the name of our content area with the publication of *The English Language Arts*. Expanding the ELA teacher's view of teaching to move beyond reading and writing instruction, Smith suggested that speaking and listening also be valued as acts of literacy in ELA classrooms—an early step in how ELA teachers not only selected literature, but also defined literacy.

ELA teachers began to have two major concerns when selecting literature:

1. How am I defining literacy in my ELA classroom?
2. As a result, what and whose literature am I defining as valuable?

In 1963, *The Newsom Report* pushed these two questions further. According to the report, half of Britain's adolescent population felt marginalized by the ELA curriculum. And, as a result, the report recommended that ELA teachers expand their definition of what counted as literacy by including more image-dominant literacies—popular culture literacies, like those found in comic books, film, television, and so on. If ELA teachers could reach out to students with more image-dominant, popular culture literacies, the report posited, ELA students would most likely become more successful literacy learners.

On top of redefining what counted as literacy in their ELA classrooms, teachers of the 1960s also focused on breaking down traditional, divisive literary boundaries: between races, cultures, genders, age groups, and so on. Essentially, ELA teachers found themselves teaching students not

only to value their own reader responses, but also to value the reader responses of a diverse array of people. Critical-reading lenses like African-American Theory, Queer Theory, Reader Response Theory, Marxist Theory, Feminist Theory, and many more took on a stronger presence in the ELA classroom.

Eliot's five-foot bookshelf was becoming just one example of who, and what type of literacy, could and should be valued in classrooms.

In the early 1980s, Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983) presented another significant stepping stone for ELA teachers. Besides placing value on a student's or a group's reading lens, teachers realized they should also pay attention to their students' individual learning styles, or intelligences. Originally, Gardner listed eight different intelligences.

Two of these intelligences were especially significant to ELA, and ELA teachers began to ask: "Are the students in my classroom more verbal-linguistic learners (more inclined to succeed with print-text literacies), or are the students in my classroom more visual-spatial learners (more inclined to succeed with visual literacies of image and space)?" The answers to these questions should, Gardner argued, influence the teacher's pedagogical approach; the answers should, in other words, help ELA teachers determine whose literature, and what types of literacy, to value in their classrooms.

Around the same time Gardner discussed different types of intelligences, Len Masterman (1985) suggested that students be taught media literacy, which emphasized both print-text literacies and image literacies. And media literacy education scholars of the 1980s and the 1990s agreed (Clark, 1983; Fehlman, 1992; Hart & Benson, 1996; Hobbs, 1997, 2007; Hoffman, 1998; The New London Group, 1996).

In 2003, well-known literacy scholar Gunther Kress took a look back at the growing significance of teaching to a variety of literacies. But, in looking back, Kress also looked forward. He posited that, due to the growing significance of teaching to a variety of literacies, we are teaching (and our students are learning!) during the greatest communication revolution of all time.

Teaching Graphic Novels presents one idea for teaching both print-text literacies and image literacies in modern ELA classrooms. Valuing the graphic novel as one modern literacy format worthy of more attention in our schools, *Teaching Graphic Novels* steps into this particular historical moment and offers ELA teachers and teacher-educators classroom-based and standards-aligned lesson ideas for teaching graphic novels in modern ELA classrooms.