
Think Piece
What I Think I Know About Comics and ELA Education

James Bucky Carter

This is what I think I know about comics' place in contemporary English language Arts (ELA): call it graphica, graphia, graphein, or sequential art; quibble over what is a graphic novel and what is graphic nonfiction if you like. So long as there is more than one panel device and the sequence of panel devices exploits a spatial-temporal narrative dynamic, it's comics or comics-like.

There are multiple political, theoretical, and research bases to justify comics' use in the classroom: the popular culture base, the multiliteracies base, the multimodal base, the multicultural base, the young adult literature base, the arts-integration base, the reading comprehension and motivation base, the media literacy base, the technology-integration base (via web comics and digital comics), even the standards-driven base; however, the best base may be the one ingrained in the progressive constructivism for which many of us in the ELA have been advocating for years.

In 2005, when I began work on what would become *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* but was then floated as the "Graphic Novels as Complements to the Classics" project, my first opinion was that the best method to assist teachers in the integration of comics in their classrooms was the complementary approach. Specifically rooted in the Young Adult Literature-centric work of Joan Kaywell and the contributors to her *Complements to the Classics* series, my contributors and I strove to help teachers see that comics could help them build connective tissue between texts. Now, in second reaction, I see that Kaywell's and my efforts coalesce with the scholarship of George Hillocks, Peter Smagorinsky, Deborah Stern, Joe Milner, Teri Lesesne, Kylene Beers, and so many more remind us of the importance of bridge building in the ELA, not just between texts of all kinds—including the texts of students' and teachers' lives—but among them.

It is a well-worn refrain, but no text is an island. There is no proper core text. There is no common core that exists in exclusion except in terms of framed affordances, not genre or medium. There *are* themes to explore, big questions to ask and answer, and transformative actions to be taken, perhaps actions which address issues of power, equity, and justice. There are texts of all kinds living in and outside of our classrooms. Comics do not necessitate a place in schools because they offer something new, per se, but because they can help get us to the type of English teaching for which we've been striving for decades, even as trends and policies and figureheads come and go.

No text is an island: redux. But all comics *are* texts. Sure, there are those who seek to examine what unique affordances they offer, and we should undertake that understanding. But we should not label comics unique such that it becomes clear we really mean “foreign” or “strange” —nor “cure-all.” Comics are texts; they offer what all texts offer. They come in a variety of genres, including poetry, abstraction, and nonfiction. They feature, as a whole, a sweeping array of classes, sexualities, races, ethnicities, politics, cultures, and myriad other social constructs and tensions. While comics are not *the* answer to revolutionizing education, they are a necessary part of optimizing it. Teachers have a responsibility to facilitate students’ exposure to, interaction with, and examination and creation of multiple existing and possible text forms. Even if the Common Core State Standards that so many of us are worrying over currently didn’t seem to dictate a new (or is that “pseudo”?) emphasis on textual diversity, twenty-first-century being, critical knowing and critical creating demand it.

Our colleagues in the humanities, many of whom have embraced comics as a worthy intellectual textuality, need to work more with those in education. Capitalizing on collaborative endeavors may help comics, literacy advocates, and researchers reach the most resistant stakeholders, those perhaps embracing nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century notions of *text*, *worth*, and *value* such that staunch defenders of an Arnoldian caste system may see that even Shakespeareans and Chaucerians note the value in image-text relationships, in words and pictures working together, in comics specifically, and that MLA and university presses across the nation have embraced comics as a serious literary and multidisciplinary field of inquiry.

Likewise, those of us who have interest in comics-and-literacy need to build connections with those studying comics from other angles, in no small part because teachers need knowledge of the existence of emerging fields of study across disciplines and to use that to push back against restrictive interpretations of curriculum, mandated or otherwise, that offer interpretations of what it means to be educated in the contemporary and burgeoning world. The emergence of “comics studies” provides one example.

Sturgeon’s Law applies to comics too. Teachers should note how to learn about exemplars. YALSA and the Texas Maverick Graphic Novel List honor great comics. Awards such as the Eisners, Ignatz, Harvey’s, and Glyphs do too (See <http://www.hahnlibrary.net/comics/awards/american.html>).

Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda remains undervalued. Its treatment of temporal-spatial relationships, interwoven with deeply signified visual iconography, its exploration of the stressed, disturbed psyche, and its simultaneous illumination of small but essential, selfless wonders and leviathan horrors humans repeatedly inflict upon one another regardless of the repeated rhetoric of “learning from past mistakes” make it an exemplar for exposure, interaction, examination, and creation/transformed practice/social justice.

About the Author

James Bucky Carter, PhD, studies the intersections of comics and literacy. He has published a variety of texts examining those connections, including *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*; *Super-Powered Word Study: Teaching Words and Word Parts Through Comics*; and *Rationales for Teaching Graphic Novels*. He speaks to educators and librarians across the nation on comics in the classroom. He founded and publishes the open-access *SANEjournal: Sequential art narrative in education*, which is dedicated to practitioner and researcher concerns regarding integrating comics into curricula at every level of education. For more information, visit www.sanejournal.net or contact Dr. Carter at jbcarter777@gmail.com.