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Education Majors

In the 2017 DC Universe Rebirth *Batgirl Vol. 2: Son of Penguin,* Barbara Gordon has

returned to Gotham after a journey abroad and settled back in her Burnside neighborhood. The

neighborhood, to her chagrin, is changing; tech start-ups have moved in, rents have doubled, and

local businesses are replaced by niche boutiques. As she fights both supervillains and the effects

of gentrification, she is thinking about what she can do for her community not just as Batgirl, but

as *Barbara*. In a friendly nod to past canon, she is attending library school to earn her Master's in

Library and Information Science, or MLIS. In her LIS 550 class, "Information and Society," the

professor asks students why they want to be a librarian. Barbara answers, "I've been thinking

about **information**. And **access**. Everyone deserves the education they want, and libraries help

make that possible" (Larson 5). As part of her education she volunteers with a weekend "coding

class" at a local elementary school, teaching various computer languages.

With her familiarity with languages and how they work, it can be reasonable to wonder

how Barbara Gordon would take on another instructional challenge. Let's say that instead of

public librarianship, she focuses toward the academic side. As a reference and instruction

librarian, she is asked to teach a session to education majors in an adolescent literature class.

They are reading Walter Dean Myers' *Monster,* but are also exploring the graphic novel

adaptation of the same novel. Many students in the class have never read a graphic narrative, or a comic book; if they did, they thought the format was restricted to superheroes. Barbara knows the importance of language, access, and all the ways people take in information and learn, and is also aware of the misconceptions people can have about things such as comics...and superheroes. With this in mind, what would Barbara Gordon do?

When we began to promote graphic novels and comics at Mississippi State University (MSU) Libraries, we were faced with this same question. Unitil the late 2000s, mention of graphic novels and comic books in library literature was sparse; a 1990 article in *Library Journal* merely brought up the idea of libraries collecting comics, and in particular detailed the difficulties of such collections, considering comics didn't use the same acquisition channels as "traditional" library materials (Decandido 51). It was another eight years before Michael Lavin published his guide to ordering comics in *Serials Review,* and not until 2007 did the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) begin to publish its annual list of *Great Graphic Novels for Teens.* The vast majority of articles dealing with comics as a practical learning tool were in literacy and education journals focused on pedagogy, with little if any mention of how students and teachers were acquiring the comic materials needed for lessons and assignments.

By 2009 however, there was a surge in the literature documenting the value of comics in libraries, particularly the relationship between comics and literacy. The primary focus was on school media centers and public libraries, and academic libraries were beginning to catch up. Meanwhile, our College of Education and Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education requested more comics content be purchased with their book allocations. We decided to highlight these during an annual workshop we hosted for school librarians from across the

state. Our display, titled "Introducing Graphic Novels to the K-12 Curriculum: Selection Tools and Resources," was featured at the MegaResource School Librarian Workshop, and was seen by Dr. Devon Brenner, a professor teaching a graduate level course that summer; the display prompted her to get in touch with me about collaborating on a class together.

"Elementary Education 8633: The Teaching of Writing," consisted of two hours of lecture and two hours of laboratory. The short catalog description reads: "Methods and materials for teaching writing in grades K-12. Formal and informal writing assessments. Writing across the curriculum." (2018-19 Academic Catalog). At the time Dr. Brenner contacted me, I was also developing a "Graphic Novels in Education" research guide for our library's website using the newly acquired SpringShare LibGuides tool. I was including several comic generator sites, which could double as storyboarding tools for narrative writing, and this piqued her interest. She was especially interested in incorporating these into an assignment for her graduate students. Over the course of several discussions, we developed a lecture and discussion session including PowerPoint slides and physical examples from our library collections. Since the class was held in one of the library computer labs, we were also able to utilize the graphic novel LibGuide and comic generators ToonDoo and ReadWriteThink's Comic Creator that would lead to completion of a storyboarding project. Students were able to practice using the strip-generating sites with the assistance of myself and Dr. Brenner, and using her expertise in writing get the students a head start on their assignment; to tell either a joke or "an embarrassing story" using the comic strip as a narrative device. The class was a success, and the students provided positive feedback.

While in the course of designing the session, I was completing final revisions and copyediting on an article on the subject that had been accepted by the official publication of the

Reference and User Services Association. The Graphic Novels in Education LibGuide was taking off, and I began hearing from other faculty in CISE interested in instruction. Word had spread that I was the "graphic novel guru" in the library. Undergraduate instructors who didn't feel as comfortable with teaching comics in particular wanted me to give their students an introduction to the format. With little time to collaborate and plan, and with a full instruction schedule for other courses, I developed a basic "Introduction to Graphic Novels" session that could be tailored to each instructor.

The following were all three hour lecture courses: "Readings in Education 3413: Middle Level Literacy I," focused on the practicum field experience of literacy teaching and learning for upper elementary and middle school students, with an emphasis on reading instruction, strategy instruction, and assessment. "Elementary Education 3233: Teaching Children's Literature at the Elementary and Middle Levels," served as an introductory course with content about selection, presentation and utilization of a variety of children's literature. "Elementary Education 3343: Teaching Adolescent Literature," was described as a study of the types of literature read by older children and adolescents, with emphasis on the criteria for the choice of good books and knowledge of available books and teaching materials.

Depending on the instructor and the requirements of the class, assignments were varied. In classes where the instructor was more familiar with comics, there were required readings. These included *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, *Monster: A Graphic Novel* by Walter Dean Myers and Guy Sims, and *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. Adaptations such as *Monster* and *The 9/11 Report* were taught alongside their text-only counterparts, while *Maus* and *American Born*

Chinese were assigned as stand-alone readings. In other classes, instructors had their students read a graphic novel of their own choosing and then assigned them to do a "book talk" based on it. It was here that our main library's Juvenile Collection was utilized most often [1]. It was simple enough to develop a session to introduce students to these materials in the library; what we had and how to find books and reviews. Initial comments from post-session evaluations were positive and mostly focused on how they appreciated the presentation. But what I wanted to do beyond that was demonstrate what made comic narratives unique and universal at the same time. This is when I revisited a couple of texts in particular; Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art*, and Scott McCloud's seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art..*

Eisner describes in his forward his realization that he was "involved with an 'art of communication' more than simply an application of art" (6), which appealed to me in particular as a communication scholar and subject specialist. The key is what he calls "the commonality of experience." (13) Comics to Eisner work as a medium because "the success or failure of this method of communicating depends upon the ease with which the reader recognizes the meaning and emotional impact of the image...the universality of the form chosen is critical." (14) Eisner's coining of the term "sequential art" to describe how comics work gets an expansion and clarification from McCloud, who after some discussion with his imaginary audience, comes up with "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response to the viewer." (McCloud 7-9) It is in this definition that we can tie together the concepts of using images *as* communication, expanding

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[1] The Juvenile Collection was originally located on the Fourth Floor in a "quiet" area of the library. In a reorganization of the library's services and collections, this collection was merged with the State Adopted Textbook Collection; relocated to the main floor of the library, and christened the "Educational Resources Collection." In 2019, a donor asked the area housing the ERC become a group and individual study area, and the collections were moved back to the Fourth Floor.

the idea of literacy, which focuses on words, to *visual* literacy. McCloud even allows for that expansion; he published all of this in 1994, before the idea of the "webcomic" came to be, yet highlighted that his definition said nothing of the tools or methods used to create comics. He conceded that "attempts to define comics are an on-going process which won't end anytime soon." (22-23)

McCloud further piqued my comic-as-communication interest by illustrating, quite literally, the analogy of the pitcher. McCloud says, "The artform--the medium--known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images," while he shows a clear pitcher labeled *comics* containing the words "writers, artists, trends, genres, styles, subject matter, themes." (6) This analogy immediately recalled to me one of the icons in the scholarship of mass media, Marshall McLuhan, who is most famous for coining the phrase "the medium is the message." (9) The pitcher analogy illustrates the danger in taking that phrase too literally, as McCloud states, "the trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger." (6) This is why from the start of each session I conduct with students, I emphasize that many refer to comics and graphic novels not as a genre, but as a format or a medium, much like an audiobook. While the information is presented in a comic form, it would be a mistake to literally judge the book not just by its cover but the look of its format.

One of the first things brought up in the class session, once we have settled the genre versus format debate, is to provide a framework to the overall class by asking, "what is a graphic novel?" Students are asked this to gauge their general knowledge on them, whether they are completely familiar with it, or think of it more in terms of traditional comics. The concept of "graphic" itself is discussed as the word has two meanings to some; one related to detailed and

explicit visual or textual descriptions, and the other related to what some may see as "objectionable" content depicted in those very texts or visuals. We put a pin in that second meaning to discuss later in regards to the issue of censorship and challenged books, and return to the visual component of graphic novels--*why* are the visuals important? It is here that we journey to Eisner's definition of "sequential art," to wit:

> In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language--a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art. (8)

What Eisner is saying in terms of "grammar" is that sequential art is a language with its own rules and framework; it has a morphology and a syntax, and while we think of learning a new language as difficult to some, for many of us we have as previously stated the "commonality of experience" to recognize it (Eisner 13). To demonstrate, I show a series of icons to the class and ask what they mean. Students immediately answer, often in unison; a light bulb draws shouts of "idea!," a picture of an old floppy disc translates to "save," a string of punctuation and symbols from the top of the keyboard is a fill-in for "cussing," etc. Even images of speech balloons are nearly universal; these students know when one denotes speaking out loud versus showing a character's inner thoughts. These icons, I explain, also include the words themselves and the style of the text. Eisner would probably see the evolution of text messaging and its alternative grammatical rules in the same way he saw the way letters were written and drawn in comics "as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound." (10) Even without showing icons, students can denote meaning; when I

ask them what it "sounds" like to them if someone sends them a text in all-caps, they interpret it as shouting. Similarly, if someone ends a text with a period, it "sounds" like sarcasm.

Icons also include the characters, their facial expressions and body gestures, the background, props and objects, even small brushstrokes that imitate steam, smoke, water bubbles, vibrations. They all help to create the vocabulary of comics, and our own experiences are what make the icons have meaning (McCloud 59). In combination, they come together to create a comic panel. That panel alone doesn't tell the story, nor is the story restricted to the confines of the panel itself. McCloud states that we take it on faith that things do not "cease to exist" outside of the panel; we can assume for instance that when a character is shown from the waist up in a panel that they still have a bottom half (McCloud 61). What our brains are doing in this case is what McCloud calls "closure"; it's the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole." (63) So while icons and panels are the two elements that are easily seen, it is the third, invisible element known as the "gutter," that is just as vital a component as the others. In some examples, it is by experience that we visualize the simplest of motions between panels. In others, what we imagine may say more about *us* than it. "Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea," McCloud says. "Closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality. If visual iconography is the vocabulary of comics, closure is its grammar." (66-67) So McCloud takes Eisner's idea of grammatical structure and puts the onus on the reader; it is *us* that creates the connections among icons and between panels, and recognizes the common patterns, patterns we have learned, again going back to Eisner, through the "commonality of experience."

Throughout the hour-long session I have with these students, I constantly return to the idea of icons and language, never just leaving it behind. When I start to discuss the myths and misconceptions of comics, for example, icons play an enormous part. One myth I tackle is that "comics are easy reading," the idea being that pictures equal simple. I then show the students an eight-panel comic of "Owly" by Andy Runton. While Owly is in fact a children's comic, it illustrates the importance of icons in storytelling, especially since there are no words at all. The challenge I pose to the students; *tell me the story*. Interpret the icons, and verbally convey the plot and the emotions of the characters. In the case of this comic, Owly and Wormy are happily watering plants when they hear a sound of protest, symbolized by the exclamation points within the speech balloons. They have disturbed a bird's nest, and the baby birds are now wet and cold. Both Owly and Wormy are upset by this, as well as conflicted, as illustrated by their facial expressions; the downturned eyes and furrowed brows show they want to help the birds but also keep the flowers alive and healthy. It it is then an idea forms, based on the light bulb. Owly sacrifices his gardening hat for the birds, placing their nest inside and hanging it from the tree; he hides to observe the mother bird's return, and the mother is grateful, shown by the heart above her. When children read this, in spite of there being no words they are still reading. Icons alone are providing the language, and the comic is building their spatial literacy, allowing them to learn facial expression, the meaning of symbols, and sequential structure.

I also highlight how the format goes beyond Language Arts and is useful in social sciences, science, mathematics, other STEM disciplines, humanities, and others. In particular with history assignments, comics and their universality gives a reader a sense of "being there"; McCloud calls this the "universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoony a face is... the more

people it could be said to describe." (31) Reading something like *Persepolis* or *March* can make the narrative more relatable, because the reader can more easily see the simply-drawn expressions as their own.

Taking this approach to teaching the grammar of comics is an ever evolving process, and there is still more assessment to do. Future plans in this direction include a collaboration with one of our professors to develop a more cohesive assignment with a clear statement of learning objectives, and an assessment tool to gauge the students' understanding of the language of comic art and the likelihood of their carrying the material into their own literacy classrooms. Using Eisner and McCloud's teachings as our signposts, and Barbara Gordon as our inspiration, we hope to create hundreds more "literacy superheroes" in their own right.

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