“When I write, I picture it in my head”: Graphic Narratives as Inspiration for Multimodal Compositions

This study describes a seventh-grade ELA classroom preparing for a visiting graphic novelist by using graphic narratives as mentor texts and creating multimodal compositions.

I didn’t know there was an art to doing that! This is the way one seventh-grader reflected on studying and composing graphic narratives in her language arts classroom. As graphic narratives become increasingly positioned as complex and legitimate literature, they are finding their way into young people’s hands and classrooms (Abate & Tarbox, 2017; Connors, 2016). Both supporting and challenging literacy practices (Dallacqua, 2017), graphic narratives have the ability to transform the ways we think about reading and writing in language arts classrooms and the ways students think about themselves as readers and writers.

Sousanis (2015) explores conceptions of communication through the structure of comics, noting that “not only space, but time and experience too, have been put into boxes” (p. 10). Playing off the panel boxes that are part of the comics medium, Sousanis theorizes that people are born into and thereby accept the ways we communicate, primarily with alphanumeric language. Schools often privilege this way of print-based reading and writing. Sousanis suggests comics as

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... a multidimensional compass, to help us find our way beyond the confines of “how it is,” and seek out new ways of being in directions not only northwards and upwards, but outwards, inwards, and in dimensions not yet within our imagination. (p. 46)

While Sousanis interrogates communication as a whole, this article explores the integration of graphic narratives into a language arts curriculum and the ways in which this medium shifts reading and writing instruction “beyond the confines of ‘how it is.’”

Following a review of literature that provides an overview of what graphic narratives are and how they are used and could be used in classrooms, I will describe a seventh-grade language arts unit focused on graphic narratives. This description, divided into four sections, first reviews the graphic narratives we read, the ways in which they were introduced to students, and their observations around author/illustrator process. The second section documents the seventh-graders’ composition work, using these graphic narratives as mentor texts. Reading, analyzing, and composing graphic narratives was part of the school’s preparation for a visit from graphic novelist Nathan Hale, which is described in the third section. Finally, the fourth section documents students’ reflections on their graphic narrative compositions and themselves as readers and writers, drawing from experiences occurring across the unit and author visit.
Groensteen (2007) argues that comics act as a language. As that language communicates, it “command[s] audience involvement” (McCloud, 1993, p. 59). The structure necessitates it. An audience to a graphic narrative must actively contribute to the reading process, which includes filling the gutters and finding links (or disconnects) between image and text (Low, 2012). Groensteen conceptualizes comics as a system that “offer[s] the reader a story that is full of holes,” lending itself to a collaborative interaction between text and reader (p. 10). Comics artists, then, structure their work with readers in mind (McCloud, 1993).

Readers

The structure of comics and graphic novels, particularly the gutter space, panels, and open-endedness of images, has been documented to draw young readers in, keep their attention, and encourage them to interact with a text (Low, 2012; Pantaleo, 2013; Sealey-Morris, 2015). Engagement with graphic texts reflects a complexity of narrative that “stands on its own” in its affordances for classroom and literacy practices (Low, 2012, p. 382). Throughout current scholarship, this complexity is often used in the service of teaching literacy skills that are required and routinely tested in schools (Carter, 2007; Dallacqua, 2012; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Monnin, 2010, 2011).

Graphic Narratives as Literature and Art

Being Medium-Specific

Connors (2011) argues that as teachers approach using a visual text, such as a comic or graphic novel, not only is there a hesitancy, but teachers may rely only on their literacy knowledge, “accustomed as they are to analyzing print texts” (p. 75). Instead, he argues, approaching comics and graphic novels should rely on “the language of art” (p. 73). This practice encourages visual readings that interrogate the values, privileges, and hierarchies that exist in art, art making, and art viewing (Duncum, 2004; Eisner, 2002; Jacobs & Low, 2017).

In particular, providing medium-specific tools (including use of color, shape, or visual perspective) builds an appreciation for what the other modes of
communication do (Bang, 2000; Connors, 2011; Zoss, 2009). Zoss (2009) suggests that in order to successfully integrate visual arts into a literacy curriculum and encourage our students to value visual communication equally with other modes, medium-specific tools are necessary. Introducing the appropriate meta-language supports students in reading visual texts critically and helps them compose such texts with thought and insight (Pantaleo, 2013). As such, comics are positioned as supporting, but also separate from, conventional literacy work.

**Slowing Down**

A close analysis of visual modalities utilizing medium-specific tools encourages the “slowing down [of] their looking” (Efland, 2002, p. 118), which may reveal additional opportunities for meaning making among young readers (Connors, 2016; Pantaleo, 2013; Sealey-Morris, 2015). Such looking is not just to gather information (Albers, 2008), but also to see, allowing art to “open our eyes . . . stir our flesh” (Greene, 1995, p. 143). This slowing down of time encourages an openness to possibilities, valuing the process of art viewing and art making, not just the final product (Sealey-Morris, 2015).

**Multimodal Composing**

Composing multimodal texts, such as graphic narratives, offers “an incredibly powerful tool for widening . . . literacies” and challenging young writers (Sealey-Morris, p. 47, 2015). Multimodal composers must be attuned to the structure of their chosen medium and understand ways to construct and manipulate that structure in order to impact their readers/audience. Skinner (2007) describes composing through multiple media with young writers as both critical and pleasurable. She suggests scrutinizing familiar texts, thus positioning them as mentor texts to support students’ own processes.

Before planning for their own composition projects, Skinner introduced popular culture multimodal texts (such as magazines, music, film, and television), and analyzed these texts through a critical lens for several weeks. This provided opportunities for students to consider how messages were being constructed and to act on them as readers and viewers. As students moved into the role of writer/composer, they drew on their prior analyses, working as “both authors and readers of texts” (p. 38).

There is a reciprocal relationship between reading and composing when it comes to gaining a deep understanding of multimodal texts. Of the comics medium, Connors (2016) argues that becoming a critical consumer of comics “is contingent on . . . opportunities to produce them” (p. 22). Readers are more aware of the text, particularly the “complex and sophisticated nature of graphic novels,” after composing their own (Pantaleo, 2013, p. 168). The students in Pantaleo’s (2013) study closely considered the comics medium before constructing their own. Focusing on panel construction, they were able to describe their composition choices with knowledge and insight into how the medium works on readers. Ultimately, they gained access to a community of designers and composers through both their analysis and creation of multimodal texts (Pantaleo, 2013). Their reading influenced their composing, and their composing their reading.

Students composing multimodally also have opportunities to reconsider themselves as creative producers and writers (Wissman & Costello, 2014). Using digital arts as an opportunity to compose, Wissman and Costello (2014) noted the ways in which students could explore “across multiple sign systems” (p. 116). This composing process opened up possibilities for aesthetic responses to literature, and students were able to “articulate how the multimodal elements work together to embody a feeling or mood” (p. 116). Further, this composing process was social; students, as creative producers, critiqued each other’s work and shared their process.

As has been suggested for other forms of writing and composing (Gallagher, 2014; Newman, 2012; Skinner, 2007), this article considers the ways in which graphic narratives and their artists work as mentor texts/mentors for composing in a language arts classroom. Similar to Skinner’s (2007) close analysis of popular culture texts described above, we spent time reading and analyzing graphic narratives before engaging in composing. This work encouraged student reflection on the composing process and on themselves as readers, writers, and composers.
Graphic Narratives as Inspiration for Multimodal Compositions

Overview of the Graphic Narrative Unit and Author Visit

I had the opportunity to observe and participate in integrating graphic narratives into a middle school curriculum. Trail Middle School (pseudonym) was interested in integrating graphic narratives across their curriculum; I was invited to support teachers in this work through professional development and to work closely with both teachers and students in planning and teaching. Together, we introduced graphic narratives as a new but legitimate medium for reading and composing in classroom spaces.

This article describes what happened in one seventh-grade language arts classroom. (Students had also experienced reading, analyzing, and using graphic narratives in science and social studies.) Seventh-graders participated in a two-week unit that I co-planned and co-taught using Rapunzel’s Revenge (Hale & Hale, 2008) and Calamity Jack (Hale & Hale, 2010). Using the graphic narratives as examples, they created comic-inspired art and an oral presentation titled, “A Comic Version of You!” This final project invited students to compose multimodally, considering artistic style and choices. (See Appendix A for the project description.) All this work was completed in preparation for a visit from the graphic narrative writer and illustrator, Nathan Hale, which occurred at the end of the school year.

Together, we introduced graphic narratives as a new but legitimate medium for reading and composing in classroom spaces.

Concurrently, I worked with a small group of seventh graders, meeting over lunch to talk more about the graphic narratives they were reading/composing and their thoughts and reflections on their in-class work. Following Hale’s visit, I met with those seventh graders one-on-one to reflect on their experiences. I draw on Ben’s, Alice’s, Timothy’s, Sienna’s, Estelle’s, and Kitty’s voices, experiences, and multimodal compositions throughout this article (all student and location names are pseudonyms). The research site, Trail Middle School, is located in a major Midwestern city. At Trail Middle School, 71.08% of the students identified as White, 11.18% as Asian, 7.95% as African American, 2.53% as Hispanic, 1.15% as American Indian/Alaskan, and 6.11% as one or more races. Two of the students mentioned in this article identify as multiracial, the other four as White.

Analyzing Graphic Narratives as Readers and Writers

The Graphic Narratives

Rapunzel’s Revenge (Hale & Hale, 2008) and Calamity Jack (Hale & Hale, 2010), are graphic narrative adaptations that incorporate the stories of Rapunzel and Jack and the Bean Stalk into adventures of family, friendship, and love. Structurally, the books are traditionally formatted. Each is 144 pages long with varying panel and page structures for narrative effect. Rapunzel’s Revenge and Calamity Jack both take advantage of a broad range of colors to establish and shift moods. For example, early in Rapunzel’s Revenge, Rapunzel finds her mother at a work camp, then experiences a flashback to when she was separated from her mother as an infant. Rapunzel’s bright yellow dress and pink party hat are in stark contrast to the browns and greys of her mother’s clothing and work environment. As readers, we see and feel the difference in wealth between Rapunzel’s upbringing and her mother’s poverty. This brings to light the mood and themes within the graphic narrative.

Dialogue bubbles in these graphic narratives are white and round, while narration appears in yellow squares to remind readers of a shift in voice. Independently, students also read a selection of Nathan Hale’s Hazardous Tales (2012)—stories that also use color within dialogue bubbles to show shifts in time. Drawn primarily in black and white with accents of a single color, Hale uses dialogue-balloon-coloring to distinguish shifting timelines and voices. This series positions Nathan Hale, the Revolutionary War Spy, as a narrator of American
History. As he is about to be executed in the first book of the series, One Dead Spy, Nathan is swallowed by the “Big Huge Book of American History” (p. 13) and gains access to historic stories of the past, present, and future.

The series continues as Nathan tells these stories in order to prolong his life. This occurs with the help of supporting narrators, the British Provost and the Hangman, who offer counter narratives and critical questions around these stories. (For more about this series, see Kersten & Dallacqua, 2017.) The Hazardous Tales series takes up significant wars, battles, and wartime materials (such as ships in the Civil War and treaties in WWI) as well as the Donner trek West, The Underground Railroad, the Alamo, and other stories from American history.

There is a large assortment of full-page setups, panel and frame sizes, and shapes throughout all of Hale’s graphic narratives discussed in and out of class. Frames are used differently to hold an image or to allow an image to spill out. There is also a wide range of text sizes, fonts, and bold letters to illustrate tone and sound from panel to panel. Returning to the scene in Rapunzel’s Revenge where Rapunzel finds her mother at the work camp, Hale changes both the color and frame design to signal a flashback, so that the beige-tinted images are surrounded by small squiggly lines, giving the impression of a dream. One of these panels stretches across the page in order to illustrate the distance between Rapunzel and her mother as they are separated. All of these stylistic choices were part of our unit introduction to these graphic narratives and to the medium as a whole.

**Our Reading and Analysis Process**

In class, we established a slow reading process that explored and valued the complex layers (some of which are described above) that are part of a graphic narrative by showing each piece individually (e.g., panels, frames, dialogue bubbles, and gutters). As a class, we looked closely at single pages and even single panels in an introductory lesson before students read the entire graphic narrative independently. For example, we looked specifically at the flashback page in Rapunzel’s Revenge. As we looked at full pages and individual pieces, we discussed questions like:

- What are our eyes drawn to? Why do we think that is?
- Is there a clear mood? How do we know?
- What do we know about tone of voice?
- Does anything fall into the gutter space?
- What do you notice about the dialogue bubbles?
- Why do we think the author/artist made that choice? (Dallacqua, 2017)

These questions helped us to slow down and take note of all the choices Hale was making through an artistic lens. These discussions led to talk of color, line, and spatiality. Taking our time, there was a focus on building a foundation of understanding around the structure of the medium and how the details throughout were functioning and helping readers to make meaning. It is important to note, however, that although we slowed our looking (Efland, 2002, p. 118) and built on the “holes” in comics (Groensteen, 2007), this pace was only used to introduce these texts so as to encourage students to notice the complexity of the medium. As we proceeded, we were not always reading and looking so slowly; rather, we were attempting to appreciate both the details and the whole text, aesthetically. After our introduction, students adjusted their reading pace accordingly.

As each page of Rapunzel’s Revenge was introduced, students immediately took in the entire page, acknowledging what they noticed first, as well as how their eyes were drawn from left to right. They pointed out the facial expressions of characters, the colors being used, and the setup of panels. They agreed that both Rapunzel’s Revenge and Calamity Jack seemed to be happier books, based on the brighter colors and smooth finished lines of the drawings. Students made comparisons to other graphic narratives they had been reading while making these distinctions.

Looking at the cover of both books, as well as at selected pages, we noticed as a class how the
characters were standing, what they were wearing, and the details of their surroundings. These details helped us think about what these characters might be like and how they may be different from other fairy tale versions. For instance, we noticed that Rapunzel has red hair, defying versions of the golden-haired princess trapped in a tower. Students also made predictions about characteristics of characters and storylines. For example, they thought of Jack as mischievous because of his facial expressions and secretive movements across one page. Finally, we looked at how panels were arranged and how the frames were both present and faded to show literary elements like flashbacks, thus complicating the narrative and showing rather than telling information. The dialogue bubbles and narrative boxes also clued us into changes in perspective and narrative voice.

As awareness grew, however, students increasingly recognized this multimodal composition process as thoughtful and deliberate.

Scaffolding and Building Vocabulary
During class, we reinforced a common vocabulary (Zoss, 2009) that was specific to our studying of graphic narratives, working slowly and deliberately through individual pages as a class, rather than asking students to dive into these texts independently first (see Fig. 1). Gutter, panel, line, and color all became regular terms as we read and discussed the structure and narrative of these graphic texts.

Young readers have acknowledged that one “won’t understand” a graphic narrative if this medium is new and read without introductory guidance (Dallacqua, 2012). Contrary to many assumptions about young people as natives to multimodal texts, young readers do not necessarily approach them with automatic understandings (Mills, 2010). “Without scaffolding of multimodal practice in formal learning contexts such as schools, students will not be taken to the outer limits of their potential in multimodal design” (Mills, 2010, p. 43). It became important and helpful to take time to break down these texts and their parts.

Students also agreed that addressing “how it’s set up” was significant to their learning in class. Alice explained that, “It was helpful to know . . . if somebody else was talking about [graphic narratives], what they might say, so you know what it is . . . . It’s so we can get more vocabulary into our language.” Therein, knowing the vocabulary around graphic narratives and their structure also made it possible to take that understanding beyond the classroom and discuss it with others.

Figure 1. An introduction to our shared vocabulary

Our Common Comics Vocabulary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parts and Pieces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Panel—the boxes (or other shapes) that hold images and are arranged as a sequential narrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame—the outline of each panel; this may also connect to perspective (below)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gutter—the space in between the panels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue, thought, &amp; narrative bubbles—a physical representation and container of what is said, thought, or heard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Visual Analysis

| Shape—includes the use of circles, squares, triangles (etc.), and the angles that make them up to create visual action, motion, and emotion |
| Color—including the use of and choice of color, shading, and visual tone to draw attention or set an emotional tone |
| Perspective—including the angles and framing of images within panels in order to position a reader in a particular way |
| Left-Right Structure—the Western cultural reading and viewing direction. Comics may take advantage of this linear, sequential tendency, or work against it. |

*These definitions are meant to be introductory only, as there are many contextual and cultural considerations to think about when approaching or creating a visual, multimodal text. See also Bang, 2000; Connors, 2011; Dallacqua, 2017; Groensteen, 2007; and McCloud, 1993, 2006 for more in-depth considerations and visual examples of these concepts and terms.
Considering the Author/Illustrator’s Process

As we read and analyzed Hale’s (and others’) compositions, students became more aware of the authorial process and the decisions that go into composing. They also considered the time spent composing. Estelle reflected:

I really thought it was important to keep in mind that [Hale] works on books for over two years, sometimes. . . . It just kind of makes you appreciate all of the art and the different components to make that book.

So although students were aware of the medium, most hadn’t fully appreciated the work to read and create them. As awareness grew, however, students increasingly recognized this multimodal composition process as thoughtful and deliberate. In this way, welcoming graphic narratives into a school challenged ways of thinking about texts, authors’ work, and the process of composing. By supporting the deep analysis of these texts prior to engaging in composing, young readers were able recognize these graphic narratives as mentor texts and “notice the techniques, moves, and choices” artists make (Gallagher, 2014, p. 29). In that respect, there are rich opportunities for the ways in which multimodal reading and analyzing can influence writing and composing in the classroom.

The Process of Multimodal Composing

The Composition Project

Students had opportunities to be positioned and position themselves as composers beyond reading and writing in an alphabetic print-based medium through their work with graphic narratives. A specific example arises from our work on “A Comic Version of You!” as the unit project for ELA. Students were asked to “think back to how Rapunzel and Jack are drawn, what they wear, and what stereotypes they defy . . . then connect that to yourself!” (see Appendix A for details). Hale’s books were used as mentor texts, and seventh graders were encouraged to “read like writers” (Newman, 2012, p. 28) before beginning the composing process. They were given questions to guide their thoughts as composers around the artistic, structural, and content choices of their assignment. Engaging in multimodal composing positioned students as knowers and doers, reinforcing student-centered and collaborative ways of operating in schools.

The Importance of Details and Time

These seventh graders recognized the difficulties in multimodal composing, especially in a school space. Estelle talked often about a love for creating art, but she identified insufficient time as a consistent roadblock, particularly because she valued the detail of her art. She explained, “I wanted to include all those different components.” Estelle had come to recognize the many complex components of Hale’s composition process, and wanted to include them in her own work. For instance, she wanted color to be a significant part of establishing a mood and to include details in the background of her image to show personal characteristics. But, just as it did for Hale, she learned that this detailed composing takes significant time to complete.

Students’ attention to detail and valuing of process was apparent as they worked on their projects during our lunch meetings as well. I observed Ben agonizing over selecting just the right color for the dragon that was a feature in his drawing (see Fig. 2). He had noticed the impact color had in the other graphic narratives he had been studying, so he considered his choices thoughtfully. Other students,
recognizing small details in the background of Hale’s graphic narratives, realized that every detail, every line serves a narrative purpose; similar detail and thought inhabited their own work. For example, in Alice’s illustrations (see Fig. 3), there are shelves filled with objects. One object was a small yellow square, which I asked Alice to describe. “I got the idea from my dad’s house. At my dad’s house I have this box full of rocks from where I’ve been.” Not only did this box represent a personal item of Alice’s, but she could explain its significance and what was inside, thus embedding stories of personal significance that were not visible to the viewer. In this way, both Ben’s and Alice’s drawings, while produced as a final unit project, were focused on their process and personal stories, shifting values of writing that existed in their classroom from product to process.

**Figure 3.** Alice’s comic composition

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**Nathan Hale’s Visit**

Students’ reading and composing of graphic narratives was not only meant to support and challenge them as readers and composers, but to prepare them for the year’s author visit. Nathan Hale visited Trail Middle School on April 14, 2015. Hale presented to each grade, then offered a “creative workshop” for a small group of students who directly requested to participate. During his presentations, instead of talking about himself or his books, Hale selected a time in history and focused on that time by drawing as he orally narrated. He relied on an iPad hooked up to a projector and drew as he talked. (You can find examples of this on his YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3DbpqPsF1nzFiBoqFękpw/feed.)

As Hale presented, he did not address his audience directly, but remained bent over his iPad, talking. As a result, the audience focused their eyes on the screen, rather than on Hale himself. Hale drew quickly, relying on rough sketches and stick figures as a base, then added specific details, movement lines, labels, and even scribbles across the page as he spoke. Additionally, Hale presented to a smaller group of students about his own path as an illustrator, author, and graphic novelist, beginning with his drawing as a young child. Again, Hale was primarily drawing through this presentation, while also showing images of past work.

The audience appeared to be captivated by this presentation, laughing, but not moving or talking, as the presentation took place. Teachers agreed that students’ attention remained with Hale through the entire 40-minute talk. The seventh graders shared that “it was neat seeing how he had the unique way of learning and whatnot.” They saw this presentation as a different way of teaching and learning, reflecting both the author’s and students’ unique ways of knowing, doing, and understanding.

Following Hale’s visit, and after students had spent time reading his work and then composing on their own, students went on to reflect on themselves and their work. Alice remembered when she started thinking of herself as an artist, doing drawings for teachers and helping with the sets for the drama
club—connecting with the very similar stories Hale shared during his visit. During Hale’s presentation, Alice had turned to look at me in disbelief. She was hearing her story, down to their shared love of Scooby Doo! Alice began to think about where her path as an artist could go following this visit. “I wonder if it’s going to build up to more of how he did it, maybe?” Alice also began thinking about how this work and the Hale visit could inspire her peers. She saw how opportunities for drawing in-class responses had “brought out more of the artistic piece of it in some other people.” And Hale’s visit had reinforced that. As Hale spoke, he sketched. These drawings were rough, but impactful, and his audience was captivated as they watched the process of creating occurring in front of them. Alice explained,

It made me think more into the kids that said they can’t draw. ‘Cause if you, like . . . even in [Hale’s] drawings, he had stick figures too! . . . And I’m like, “he’s a professional artist, but he is using stick figures as base people, or even as characters in his stories.” That made me think differently when he did it.

Alice found Hale’s illustrating in front of her to be inspiring personally, but also motivational for students who may not consider themselves artists. She was impressed by what Hale could accomplish through rough sketches and stick figures, reframing what she, and possibly other people, consider to be art. And she hoped it impacted her peers in the same way it impacted her.

**Composing with Inspiration, Purpose, and a Sense of Audience**

Students engaged in composing and interacted with a published graphic novelist, which inspired them as composers. As they reflected on their experiences and their compositions, they were simultaneously acting as audience members and (re)positioning themselves as composers. Further, students were deeply considering audience. Below are two examples of seventh graders reflecting on their own work. They described their work with authority and expertise, making note of the inspiration that influenced them, as well as the ways in which they hoped their compositions would influence audiences of their work.

**Ben’s Composition Reflection**

Ben was one student who shared his work, process, and thoughtfulness in great detail (see Fig. 2). Ben explained his choices and process this way:

I kind of wanted an evil vs. good sort of theme, I don’t know why. But, so I made this volcano because I think that, I always thought volcanoes were kind of cool. And, I wanted that to symbolize evil . . . I put the water around it, almost, as if to balance out the lava from the volcano, as if it’s like good versus evil.

During his presentation of his final drawing, Ben briefly noted the dangerous mood he was trying to create in his image. In particular, Ben points out that he drew himself so small because “a lot of people think I am just a little guy who can’t really do anything . . . basically just a nerd . . . . That’s not necessarily true, and I tried to show that here.”

Taking inspiration from *Calamity Jack*, Ben thought about how he saw himself alongside how he believed others saw him. Both Jack and Freddie are characters in *Calamity Jack* who experience similar tensions. Ben noted feeling particularly interested in Freddie becoming a hero because of his brains. In his drawing, Ben shows this stress between versions of himself, expertly using images, color, and spatial arrangement of objects. The blue of the water traces a clear line against the encroaching lava of the volcano. Ben’s purple dragon has a sense of movement toward both the lava and moated castle, although it is not clear which side of the water is safer. The tension around Ben and the small, stick-figure version of himself as a hero jumps off the page.

Throughout his drawing, Ben was able to build these contrasts through image, color, theme, and symbolism. Ben’s hard work and thoughtful choices drew on our analysis in class. We had similar discussions around the impact of color and placement and how to take advantage of literary devices like symbolism through visuals (Dallacqua, 2012). Ben had experienced and commented on these ways of communicating in class and in our discussions outside of class; that work was apparent in his final project. In this way, Ben was using Hale’s work as a narrative and structural example.

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Ben also noted the influence that learning with graphic narratives had on his own composing. He put a lot of thought and effort into the graphic narratives illustration of himself, as noted above, and he saw implications for how this work influenced other ways of composing for him.

Ben shared that in the past, he did not enjoy writing in the traditional, print-based sense. He struggled to come up with ideas and get them down on paper. However, he enjoyed the writing that accompanied his drawing for his graphic narrative project. Ben describes how composing in multiple modes to tell one story impacted other composing processes. As he worked through his drawing for ELA, he could mentally picture, physically draw, and then write about his ideas. “And then eventually I think I found out, well, I guess you don’t have to draw all the time to make it fun.” He also shared that he is currently writing a science fiction narrative, exclaiming, “It’s awesome, I know exactly what I’m going to do!” He went on to explain, “I feel like when I write now, after this, I feel like this changed me. When I write, I picture it in my head. I picture all the events happening.”

Ben noted specific implications of his own multimodal composing. Along with the value this work held for Ben as an artist, other ways in which he composed and how he felt about the process shifted. Further, Ben began positioning himself as a composer as he engaged in and reflected on the multimodal reading and composing he was doing in class.

Kitty’s Composition Reflection

Kitty also shared her perspectives about reading and viewing graphic narratives as mentor texts for composing. She discussed her shifting perspectives of graphic narratives as she read and worked with them in class and attended Nathan Hale’s presentation. Structuring pages was something Hale attended to carefully. He shared that he tried to think about “each page [as] almost its own little standalone that starts with a little premise and ends on a little kicker, the funny little joke that makes the whole page, makes you laugh. Then you jump onto the next page. . . . It makes the reading just really pleasurable.” Kitty, who chose to read all of Hale’s texts after reading Rapunzel’s Revenge and Calamity Jack in class, picked up on this. In particular, she noted the art of placing panels together on each page and how because of this placement, we felt propelled to the next page.

I didn’t know there was an art to doing that. . . . But then you figure out, it’s like, [graphic novelists are] doing it on purpose, in this order. And I never knew like, they did it in a certain . . . captivating order to get you to want to read it more. Like, he made it suspenseful . . . And [I didn’t realize] that they were trying to do that on purpose. I thought it just happened that way.

Over time, Kitty recognized that the details she was paying attention to were purposefully placed and working on her, grabbing her attention. This kind of acknowledgement can be empowering for readers. Kitty shifted how she was viewing graphic narratives and realized the purposeful way that Hale constructed pages.

With similar purpose, Kitty constructed her own graphic narratives, considering timing, details, and how readers may approach the text. Notably, during our last interview, she referred to herself as an author, particularly when discussing Hale’s visit. And she recognized her power as she made structural decisions in her graphic narrative. For example, Kitty chose to break up narration bubbles and boxes throughout the graphic narrative (see Figs. 4 & 5), formatting them similarly to how Hale does in the Rapunzel graphic narratives. Her narration appears in yellow squares, while her dialogue bubbles are white and round, spaced out for effect.

When I asked her about them she shared,

Well, it’s kind of like, the way, like, you hear in movies, like when they take a long pause. Well, you can’t really do that. So I kind of spaced it out. So it’s like, she’s thinking. And then she takes a break.

Drawing from her discoveries around authors’ purposeful moves in graphic narratives and the control around time that film directors have, Kitty
Conclusion

Reading and studying graphic narratives provides opportunities for students and their literacy practices. Seventh graders were invited to respond in multimodal ways that counted in their academic space, and they were able to attend a school-sanctioned author/graphic novelist visit. Graphic narratives were positioned as legitimate and complex literature and as an option for writing in the school. More important, students described themselves as writers and composers, spoke of their work in deliberate and sophisticated ways, and conceptualized a clear audience for that work.

Time and Support

To compose in multimodal ways, students needed to take time to analyze other multimodal work. They engaged in complex and critical analysis of visual mediums using new vocabulary and concepts that align with the arts. This work was guided and completed as a class before digging into reading graphic narratives independently from beginning to end. This time and scaffolding was imperative to a complex and critical engagement and understanding of the medium. Ultimately, students’ own multimodal composing was considered thoughtfully, as shown in their own reflections and references to graphic narratives as mentor texts.

Just as we sometimes read and analyzed slowly, we took time to compose multimodal texts. In order for students to develop their writing thoughtfully, in whatever medium, they need time. Therefore, the process of composing must be just as valued as the final product if this kind of work is to be truly legitimate in a school space. The seventh graders pointed to this process as they reflected on the stick figures

Figure 4. Kitty’s comic composition

Figure 5. A panel from Kitty’s comic composition reading: “And yet little did she know. I wasn’t really shy. / Just thinking.”

manipulated her bubbles and boxes, purposefully structuring time in her graphic narrative, guiding readers through pauses, and pacing reading so it aligned with her characters’ pace. Kitty’s sophisticated composing shows a deep understanding of how the medium can function and demonstrates how she drew on other texts as inspiration. Her graphic narrative exemplifies the complex and thoughtful work that is possible through multimodal composition.
and messiness of Hale’s in-the-moment composing. His presentation drawings, while not a final draft, were both entertaining and impactful, and students continued to acknowledge the value of his visit; meeting a graphic novelist and seeing him work mattered to these young people.

**Being Writers and Composers**

Composing multimodally challenges the ways we think about reading and writing in classrooms, particularly because it invites the arts into these processes. Reading and writing in a new medium, paired with meeting a graphic novelist, was reflected in the ways students talked about their work, noting their own details and choices in deliberate and thoughtful ways. Students’ reflections and discussions about their work illustrated that multimodal composition was complicated, difficult work. Further, they began referring to themselves as writers, not just as they composed for a language arts assignment (as Ben and Kitty did), but also as they thought about their future selves (as Alice did). Ultimately, this work inspired opportunities for students to position themselves as sophisticated, thoughtful, and creative composers.

**References**


Hale, N. (2015, March 15). War hats. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3DbpqPsF1nzFiBoUqFtKpw/feed


Instead of creating traditional book reports or writing summaries, get “graphic” by creating a comic book or cartoon adaptation of the major scenes from the books in the activity Comics and Graphic Novels.


In The Comic Book Show and Tell students craft comic scripts using clear, descriptive, and detailed writing that shows (illustrates) and tells (directs). After peers create an artistic interpretation of the script, students revise their original scripts.

http://bit.ly/1QrOZjg

In this Multimodal Autobiography Project, students express themselves verbally, visually, and musically by creating multimodal autobiographies, exchanging ideas with other students and sharing important events in their lives through visual presentations.

http://bit.ly/1HaEaN5

Children’s Literature Cited

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Appendix A: “Comic Version of YOU!” assignment guide for students

**Graphic Novel Unit—Brainstorming: Create the Comic Version of YOU!**

Think back to how Rapunzel and Jack are drawn, what they wear, and what stereotypes they defy . . . then connect that to yourself!

**Directions:** After you have answered the questions below, create an illustrated comic version of yourself. Label and explain your illustration. You will present this work at the end of the unit, explaining all of your choices. Your presentation should address all of the questions below.

**Consider Art**

What kind of drawing style will you use? Will you look more realistic or cartoon-like? Will you use color or not? What colors? Why?

What mood will your comic portrait portray? How will you create that mood? Why?

**Consider Clothing and Objects**

What do you wear that makes you most comfortable?

Will you be carrying anything? What and why?

Will there be anything in the background? What and why?

**Consider Actions and Powers**

Do you (could you) have powers? What are they and how will you represent them?

What things are important to you? How will you represent them?

How do you like to spend your time? How will you represent this?

How will you represent what makes you unique? What stereotypes do you defy?