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# Using Graphic Novels, Anime, and the Internet in an Urban High School

Using forms of popular culture not frequently found in schools, the authors encouraged urban English-language learners and native English speakers to improve their written communication. Excerpts from students' stories demonstrate the success of this approach.

**A**dolescents who struggle with reading and writing are often grouped in remedial classes and spend countless hours with worksheets and paraprofessionals. The focus of many intervention programs is basic skills, such as decoding. But as Gallego and Hollingsworth remind us, these intervention programs fail to recognize the multiple literacies that the students possess. Using popular culture builds on students' multiple literacies (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood 3), as we found when we employed alternative genres such as graphic novels, manga, and anime. Students used these and other forms of popular culture, including the Internet and teen magazines, to enhance their creation of an illustrated story.

## Meet the Class

We were intrigued by the status of graphic novels among adolescents. We hoped this hidden literacy might allow us to create lessons in reading and writing that addressed the multiple literacies that students possessed and needed to develop. Hoover High School, in the most densely populated and poorest community in San Diego, is notable in its diversity—more than thirty languages are spoken by 2,200 students who all qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. The thirty-two students in our class were ninth graders enrolled in a ninety-minute class designed for struggling readers and writers. Seventy-two percent of the thirty-two students were English-language learners who had not yet developed proficiency in English. Their average

reading level was 5.4 on the Gates-MacGinitie assessment. Of the thirty-two, twenty-four were Latino/Latina, four were Asian American, three were African American, and one was White.

As university teacher-educators working in a partnership with a large, urban high school, we were interested in enhancing literacy acquisition for adolescents from diverse backgrounds. This article discusses our experiences teaching a ninth-grade writing course that emphasized the use of popular culture as a vehicle for developing students' writing skills.

## Scaffolding Instruction: Using Graphic Novels as Writing Prompts

We had observed students actively engaged with anime and manga materials (see sidebar), although not in sanctioned school activities. Evidence of their interest usually appeared in the margins of their writer's notebook pages, on the covers of assignment folders, and in the sheaves of drawings they squirreled away in their backpacks. When we attempted to strike up conversations about these works, students seemed reluctant to discuss them, perhaps because it would disclose a literary form belonging to their generation. When we explored graphic novels in local bookstores, we found both positive elements and serious drawbacks to our incorporating

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this material into writing instruction. A barrier for school use is the predominance of violence and sexual images in many graphic novels. On the other hand, the limited amount of text would allow students to read and respond to complex messages with text that better matched their reading levels.

Our persistence paid off when we discovered the works of Will Eisner, one of the original developers of the graphic novel in the West. Eisner's novels would work in our classroom—his subject matter was primarily about urban life and therefore addressed topics familiar to the students, the stories were short (often 1–3 pages in length), and his artistic style was quite different from the anime images we saw in students' possession. This last consideration was important because we did not want to co-opt something that belonged to the students. Rather, we chose to tap into their understanding of texts that rely as much on a visual vocabulary as a written one. Eisner's *New York: The Big City* was especially useful in our classroom because it is divided into short, independent chapters.

We began with "Hydrant" as a shared reading. Each student had a copy of the first six of the nine panels of the wordless story that tells the tale of a woman living in a tenement without running water. She must carry pails of water filled at the fire hydrant outside her building up flights of stairs to prepare a

bottle for her baby. As she feeds the baby, she gazes solemnly at photographs of a tropical landscape stuck into the frame of a mirror. One photograph stands out—a woman carrying buckets of water on a yoke balanced across her shoulders. Using a think-aloud technique (Oster 65), we began "reading" the story while pointing out techniques the artist had used to convey meaning. We also brainstormed descriptive vocabulary that could be used to capture the drama. We did not discuss the ending, which was left up to the imaginations of the student writers.

Students then wrote the story using words. Students took various perspectives, but most focused on the lost promise of a better life in a new land. Frederico's first draft, "Escaping Jamaica," represents a fairly traditional retelling of the story (all student work is presented as written):

The home of opportunity is what they call the US. As this Jamaican lady goes to get water from a fire hydrant she thinks, "I was beter off at home." Her neighborhood is destroyed and her house looks like it may colaps on her and her baby. She carries the water the stories up just to feed her son. "Come on baby," she said, "food is almost ready." As she feeds her son she looks at the photographs she took back home and said, "I thought this was the land of oportunities."

We were pleased that Frederico used dialogue to propel the story and provide insight into the characters. Previous lessons had emphasized dialogue construction and the attendant punctuation difficulties. Frederico's draft suggests that he had mastered the use of these meaning markers, even breaking a sentence in two ("'Come on baby,' she said, 'food is almost ready.'") to increase the tension in this simple statement.

Sanjit, whose family had emigrated from Thailand several years ago, was facing great difficulty in his life. A week after he wrote this story he told us that his family had been served an eviction notice for having too many people living together. He entitled his story "Irony":

Life is miserable, isn't it? Freedom and happiness . . . that's what they promise in America, isn't it? This is what I thought when I was still living in the islands, but "boy" was I in for it. I think this is what they call poor in America. Who would have ever imagined that I have to go through such labor

#### A MANGA PRIMER

The manga genre is more widespread in Japan than in Western countries and dates back to the early part of the twentieth century. Japanese manga rendered in black and white and printed on newsprint are read by children and adults and include many topics, although science-fiction *mechas* (robots) dominate the field. The topics are surprisingly similar to Western young adult fiction. A large portion of the market is *shojo*, comic books designed to appeal to girls. *Shonen* manga is designed primarily for boys and usually consists of action stories. However, unlike the broad range of genres available in Japan, the stream of manga reaching Western shores appears skewed toward violent and sexually graphic titles (called *hentai*, or "perverse") and does not reflect the wide range of quality available. Many manga are published in serial form and together can be up to 750 pages.

just to feed my son? Ha Ha. Looks like I can't escape but at least my homeland bring some happiness into my life.

Sanjit's story differed from the ending Fred-erico and other students chose. He regarded the photographs on the mirror as comfort for the protagonist, unlike Frederico's interpretation of the photos as marking the decline in the quality of the woman's life.

Encouraged by the students' responses, we were determined to provide more opportunities for the use of graphic novel excerpts as a means for writing. Over the next two weeks we used chapters from works by Eisner, as well as excerpts from other graphic novels (see sidebar). We followed a similar lesson plan format each time: Use the text as a shared reading, instruct using a think-aloud strategy, and discuss word choice and vocabulary as devices to give power to the writer's message. Visual stories allowed students to discuss how the authors conveyed mood and tone through images. We could then discuss techniques for doing so through words.

When we noticed that students overused the word *said* in their dialogues, we presented a lesson called *Said is Dead* to introduce more creative ways to indicate speech (Peterson 33). Another lesson on shades of meaning in words was connected to an episode depicting the thirteen-year-old protagonist's search for a job to support his hungry family in Vittorio Giardino's *A Jew in Communist Prague: Adolescence*. Using the "shades of meaning" metaphor suggested by paint-chip cards that had been donated by a local home improvement store, students selected and arranged a continuum of five words related to a topic (Goodman 83–84). Students consulted dictionaries and thesauri to complete the cards and then used some of the words in their writing. Yesenia's card is shown in Figure 1.

These words apparently resonated with Yesenia, who had arrived two years earlier from Mexico, and she applied them in a way that surprised us. Rather than write on the assigned story about the boy seeking a job, she incorporated these words into a version of her "Hydrant" story, entitled "A Depres Women":

On a regular day in a rusty town, this women came out from a house to get water. The woman looked very tier. She got the water and go up stairs to her

FIGURE 1. Shades of Meaning

HUNGRY
Fasting
Hungry
Ravenous
Famished
Starving

famished baby. The hallway looked all ruined and as she entered the room; the ravenous baby waiting for her. When the bottle was ready she sat down with the baby and looked at the mirror. Pictures of where she used to live were in her mind; she tought, "It would be better if I still lived in my island." She felt depres because she couldn't do anything to help herself or her starving baby.

Although there were numerous spelling and syntax errors common among writers working in a second language, we were heartened to see that she had engaged in the act of revision in the authentic way that writers revise—not as a step in a process, but because she had a new idea to explore within an existing piece.

Students also needed to learn how to efficiently convey multiple ideas in one or two sentences. We taught many rounds of Triple Sentence Sessions (Fearn and Farnan 147). In this brief writing exercise, the teacher introduces three ideas (not words) in succession for students to turn into a cohesive writing passage. We brainstormed words and phrases to represent each idea. Students then wrote a sentence containing the idea, using words they had heard in the discussion or others they recalled. It is important to note that only one idea unit was presented at a time so that students could not plan the combination of their sentences in advance. Once we began with the idea of teenager. Sanjit wrote, "The youth looked down at his siblings." The next idea was a meal, and

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he wrote, "The youth looked down at his siblings. His eyes focused on their lunch." The final idea was

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a crime, so he now wrote, "The youth looked down at his siblings then focused his eyes on their lunch. Quickly, he snatched the lunches away."

Based on the same three ideas,

Tynessia wrote, "Young people today are oppressed by the lack of quality school lunches. It is a crime that the school gets paid to serve what they serve."

We began to see more evidence of complex sentences and multiple ideas in students' work. Five-minute timed-writing samples over the course of this four-week unit bore this out; the mean sentence length in the class increased from 11.2 to 12.89 words.

As student confidence grew, we presented only the beginning of a chapter and asked students to construct the ending. Eisner's "Art" opens with two young males lurking around a dark rail yard, spray-paint cans in hand. They scale a fence and paint the word "Chico" in huge letters across the side of a subway train. We stopped the story there and invited students to create the ending. We discussed the use of dialogue, vocabulary, and multiple ideas to make their piece more compelling. Daisha wrote a first draft called "It Would Have Been Nice to Ask":

My brother and his friend was walking to the store. His friend gave him an incentive to go tag the subway, so they jumped the fence and walked over there. See, my brother is the kind of guy that when someone tells him to do something he will do it.

#### GRAPHIC NOVELS AND PICTURE BOOKS USED AS WRITING PROMPTS

- Charlip, Remy. *Fortunately*. New York: Scott Foresman, 1993. A picture book about a boy's attempt to attend a birthday party that alternates between "fortunately" and "unfortunately."
- Collins, Max Allen, and Richard Piers Rayner. *Road to Perdition*. New York: Pocket, 1998. A groundbreaking graphic novel of a hit man for the Irish-American mob in the 1930s who must protect his young son from the people he works for.
- David, Lawrence. *Beetle Boy*. Dragonfly, 2001. This picture book is inspired by Kafka (with a happy ending) and recounts a day in the life of Gregory, a young boy who awakes to find he has become a beetle.
- Eisner, Will. *New York: The Big City*. New York: DC Comics, 1981. The grandfather of Western graphic novels portrays the trials and tribulations of his fellow New Yorkers.
- . *City People Notebook*. New York: DC Comics, 2000. In this insightful graphic novel, Eisner is continually inspired by the small details of urban dwelling.
- Giardino, Vittorio. *A Jew in Communist Prague: Adolescence*. Trans. Joe Johnson. New York: NBM, 1997. The second of a three-part epic graphic novel follows Jonas as he tries to support his family after his father is imprisoned.
- Kafka, Franz, Peter Kuper, and Jules Feiffer. *Give It Up! And Other Short Stories*. New York: NBM, 2003. Kuper illustrates nine short stories by Kafka in this graphic novel that packs a powerful psychological message of dark humor in the midst of despair.
- Laird, Roland Owen. *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans*. New York: Norton, 1997. A graphic novel depicting the extensive history of African Americans from the Middle Passage to the 1990s.
- Muth, Jon J., P. Craig Russell, John McCrae, and Eric Powell. *9–11: September 11th, 2001 (Stories to Remember, Volume 1)*. New York: DC Comics, 2002. Notable comic-book artists from around the world offer their impressions of the tragedy of September 11 and the struggle of survivors, rescue workers, and citizens to understand how the world changed.
- Smith, Charles R., Jr. *Loki and Alex: The Adventures of a Dog and His Best Friend*. New York: Dutton, 2001. A photographic essay that alternates perspectives between a boy and his dog as they interpret common situations very differently.
- Wegman, William. *Surprise Party*. New York: Hyperion, 2000. Wegman's pet Weimaraners star in this campy send-up of a surprise party for one of the dogs.
- . *Little Red Riding Hood*. New York: Hyperion, 1999. An unorthodox retelling of the familiar fairy tale that stars the author's famous dogs.
- . *My Town*. New York: Hyperion, 1998. The dogs must write a school report even though they would rather use photographs to illustrate the assignment.
- Wiesner, David. *Tuesday*. New York: Clarion, 1991. This wordless picture book imaginatively portrays a mysterious Tuesday night when frogs fly and high jinks ensue.

Well, as they got the spray paint ready they was talking about their friends looking up to them for doing this. So they started to do their little “art” when the police caught them. They was scared and was saying, “Please don’t tell our parents!” The officer said, “we have to, son.” The police officer then said, “We’re going to let you off with a warning but next time it’s all over.” Officer Brown then surprised them both. “Ya’ll wouldn’t have got in trouble because the owner likes kind of stuff.”

Daisha employed an effective literary device by making the meaning of the title clear only at the end of the passage. This piece required some editing, especially regarding the conventions of grammar. However, the revised piece did not differ from the original in its tone or surprise ending.

### The Culminating Project: Illustrated Stories as Popular Culture

Using graphic novels to scaffold writing instruction helped students practice the craft of writing and gain necessary skills to become competent readers. After several weeks of using graphic novel excerpts, we introduced the culminating project, an illustrated story. This assignment was designed to extend our creative writing instruction and was not to be autobiographical. We hoped that students’ multiple experiences of closely examining visual imagery as a means of telling a story had prepared them for this project. We distributed disposable cameras to the students and outlined general rules for using them in school. The first frame was used to photograph the writer for later use in an “about the author” segment on the inside of the back cover.

We also modeled teacher-constructed illustrated stories and described our creative processes in writing the text. Using photographs from a formal party, we described a fanciful and completely fictitious event. A teacher candidate assigned to our classroom also modeled a story. Using black-and-white images from a book on psychological images in therapy, she wrote a five-part serial on a mysterious house and its ghostly inhabitants. We later discovered that this piece inspired one of our students to use a similar technique.

We encouraged students to apply alternative texts and nontraditional information sources to their work. They had access to three computers with In-

ternet connections, and we scheduled several class periods in the school’s computer lab so that students could use images from Web sites to enhance their work. In addition, we discussed how the text and illustrations work together to tell a story in several picture books (see sidebar). The books had fantasy themes or storylines that were clearly fictitious in nature because students’ illustrated stories were to be of a similar genre. For example, we used Lawrence David’s *Beetle Boy* for its innovative retelling of Franz Kafka’s novella *Metamorphosis* and as a link to a graphic novel of Kafka’s works interpreted by Peter Kuper that we had viewed earlier in the unit. William Wegman’s fairy tales using Weimaraner dogs to portray the characters were well received. Wordless picture books like *Tuesday* by David Wiesner linked to the graphic novel excerpts we had previously read. Many of the devices used in these picture books appeared in student work.

After the film was developed, students began constructing a cohesive story. We required that at least fifteen images with supporting text be included in the illustrated story. We conferred with students as they constructed their stories orally because we have found that conferring with students in the initial stages of a project can be particularly valuable to English-language learners and other students who struggle with writing. Saying their ideas frees them to use words without the self-editing that poor spellers often perform (Lapp and Flood 256). In some cases, we scribed important words and phrases for later student use as a modified version of a Language Experience Approach (Fisher and Frey 398). We later read drafts and supported revisions. In the final stages, students engaged in peer editing, then mounted images and text on sheets of construction paper that had been assembled using the school’s binding machine.

The resulting works were a fascinating lens on popular culture and its artifacts in adolescent writing. All of the thirty-two students completed the project and, while most used their photographs to illustrate their essays, some utilized nontraditional techniques. Two students, both accomplished artists, used original anime art exclusively while a third used

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panels from graphic novels we had read in class to complement his photographs. A member of a punk band called Verbal Diarrhea illustrated his story of the band's hitting it big by cutting the photographs and then completing the images with original art for a collage effect.

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Other students were inspired by writing they had seen in unit lessons. Juanita's story, "The Last Goodbye," employed the psychological thriller theme utilized in the illustrated story that had been modeled by the teacher candidate. Juanita used images clipped from teen magazines to illustrate the story using panels. An excerpt of the opening of her essay read:

Last summer Jane and her mom Tonia went to visit her grandfather in L.A. Her grandfather liked writing love stories and sad stories in the basement of his house. . . . The next day Jane asked her grandfather, "Who is the lady in the picture?" He sat her on his lap and sighed, "That was the love of my life, but now she is gone." They both just sat quietly.

Many students used Eisner's themes of urban life in their writing. Arturo's "A Tragic Hit on Cinco de Mayo" began:

San Luis Obispo was silent. Violence was nowhere to be found. Peace was unique and rich and friendliness was everywhere. It was the day of Cinco de Mayo. A party was to take place and the food was prepared by hand so it would be fresh. People were happy and had big smiles. Kids were together and parents were talking to each other.

Soon after, an unknown gunman opens fire on the crowd and Jack, the protagonist, pursues the perpetrator into a nearby wooded area. However, he is torn about whether to give chase or remain behind to tend to the dead and wounded:

Jack was in shock from what he had seen. He was scared of what might happen if he left the town now that death had taken place. Jack doesn't even know who killed the whole town, but he will avenge all of the death he has seen.

Several students wrote stories inspired by playing interactive games on the Internet. Minh described a tense battle in "The Tournament Starts Now." A humorous device in his photographs stood

in contrast to the serious nature of the text—his two opponents were toddlers:

It was my turn now (the best of the best in the house of game). As the tournament runner I must also play by the rules. As the day went by, so did the game. I lost money to two of my challengers. . . . I have tried my best, but could not beat the GoSu.

We were unfamiliar with the term *GoSu* but learned that it is a Korean gaming term that means *expert*. Minh explained that to be named GoSu is the highest honor in Internet interactive games.

Overall writing results were excellent, and we achieved many of the goals we had set. During the month, students increased their mean written sentence length. All of the essays featured dialogue to tell the story, and the story lines fulfilled the requirement of fantasy or creative writing. We were pleased to see that many writers explored more sophisticated word choice. The average length of the illustrated stories was 478 words, representing some of the most sustained writing these students had engaged in to this point.

## The Power of Popular Culture

Having begun with the idea that graphic novels were comic books at best and a waste of time at worst, we now realize the power they have for engaging students in authentic writing. These forms of popular culture provided a visual vocabulary of sorts for scaffolding writing techniques, particularly dialogue, tone, and mood.

More importantly, we resisted the temptation to focus on remedial skills instruction and instead used popular culture and the media to invite students into school literacy. The use of these forms of popular culture and media afforded us a space to provide students with instruction on the craft and mechanics of writing. Our students became not only better writers but also more knowledgeable consumers of ideas and information.

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Courtesy of Eri Izawa, <http://www.mit.edu/people/rei/Anime.html>

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## *EJ* 75 Years Ago

### The Power to Adjust

If you are a liberal teacher, and most of us try to be, you are attempting to make your pupils enjoy the study of literature and the process of writing. But what thrills are you offering your pupils? Most teachers feel that there is something degrading to the profession in the admission that a successful teacher apparently needs far more nowadays to be an entire vaudeville show than a walking emasculated *Britannica*. Do you try to break the age in which you live or do you try to understand it? If you and I are living in a jazz age, we live in an environment over which we have no more control than did the Victorians over the Victorian age. Surely no one at that time really enjoyed having a stuffed dog in the parlor! But without condemning the urge that demanded something dead under glass, the resourceful Victorian could always substitute a canary for the dog. Similarly a liberal teacher in the jazz age needs far more the power to adjust than the power to condemn.

Wanda Orton. "Released Writing." *EJ* 18.6 (1929): 465–73.