
Foreword

In 2007, in the introductory chapter to *Building Literacy Connections With Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, I wrote that “Although it is hoped that teachers might be convinced by this collection of essays and similar works to try comics or graphic novels in the classroom, more needs to be written to be sufficiently compelling for the most conservative educators” (p. 13). While I do not claim credit for the many comics-and-literacy articles and books that have been published since then, it is nice to see so many teacher-educators, humanities scholars, librarians, graduate students, and practicing teachers adding to the body of research regarding comics and literacy: a corpus, by the way, that stretches at least as far back as the 1940s. Comics and education are linked and have been for decades—centuries even, if we take into account the connections between contemporary graphica and related forms of sequential art. As I tell my students, “Anyone who has sight is a visual learner.” Humans are wired to learn visually, and the image-text interface will always be a means of learning, recording, sharing, and knowing. While I know there are still educators reluctant to integrate comics into the curriculum, to embrace fully the utility and history of the image, I take heart in the growing number of educators who see that doing so is no more a “fad” than blue jeans or movies, both of which were coming into the American consciousness around the same time as comic strips.

With so many folks now mining the intersections of graphica and literacy, though, the question of ethos, or expertise and authority, must be addressed. Where does authority reside in contemporary English language arts (ELA) regarding the integration of comics and graphic novels? Within the data sets of the quantitative researcher? Within the case studies of the qualitatively minded professor? Within the well-written essay of a person deemed by fans of the form as an intelligent expert? The librarian? The teacher? The comics art creator?

To me, the question is highly connected to the more general inquiry of where authority resides now in education as a whole. One of my favorite articles of the past few years addressing this question is Frederick M. Hess’s “The New Stupid” (2008). Hess suggests that while the current emphasis on quantitative data in education and education studies is appropriate, such data may also be misused or overused. Authority, Hess

seems to say, doesn't reside just in the numbers. Qualitative researchers and those employing mixed-methods would be quick to agree. Having been trained as a humanities scholar before becoming an English educator, I tend to see data-driven research as just another rhetorical tradition and approach to understanding, with inherent flaws just like any other. However, I often feel that nowadays the English in ELA is being ignored in favor of senses of ethos that devalue humanities and practitioner-based ways of knowing and communicating. For example, I see shifts in the types of articles some journals are publishing, shifts away from the rich humanities traditions that still have an important place for practicing professionals; in comics-and-literacy related work, specifically, sometimes I notice articles passing peer-review without referencing salient examples of preceding work that should be known and referenced; and I see a variety of campuses remarketing themselves as research-focused at the expense of being seen as teaching-centered. While I understand some of the reasons behind these shifts, I often feel like important nuances are being erased from the discourse of contemporary education and from what it means to be involved in a field like English education that should always bridge the humanities and the social sciences.

To be fair, sometimes I see comics creators making blanket statements about learning without any mention of educational theory or figures. I have seen scholars in other fields and comics advocates make claims about teaching and comics as if simply "saying it makes it so." Because of these things, I am quick to share with my own students, who I do hope will come to see themselves as teacher-researchers, this maxim: all research is important, and all research is bullshit. That is to say, when it comes to education and one's practice thereof, consider everything as if it has something "valid" to offer, but always consider that it might have some flawed and limited theses, and try to figure out what those flaws and limits might be. Nothing, not even write-ups of quantitative data, can give us the complete answer: no one source, no one method, no single expertise.

So, where does authority reside in ELA today? Where does it reside in the intersections of comics and education? The answer is that it must reside in multiple sources. The rusting melting pot of intellectual ideas and pedagogy must morph into a dinner table, where there are many dishes to choose from and room for everyone. That is why I am so pleased with the effort you are about to read. While many comics-and-literacy scholars do have experience using graphica in K-12 settings and have written about those experiences, many of us teach at the university level now. That's not to say we don't ever interact in K-12 schools, but I think we'd all be quick to say that our roles and responsibilities at our universities are not exactly the same as they were when we taught full-time in elementary, middle, or

high schools. Maureen's chapters are rooted in current actual practice with contemporary American adolescents. She knows what works and what hasn't and knows how to use real-time teacher research—the hit-or-miss, messy, sometimes instinctual, often “based-in-theory-and-scholarly-research-but-not-a-slave-to-it” kind of information that teachers gather, sort, and analyze every day, on the go, while balancing a hundred other stimuli.

Maureen shares experiences and artifacts from what she calls “the graphic novel classroom,” a place where “students liked to read and authentic literacy occurred.” She shares nothing she hasn't used or reflected upon, and as you begin to integrate or adjust the ideas in these chapters to your own classrooms, she will be doing the same. You and your students will put your own authentic marks on the texts, strategies, and ideas shared herein, and you will never be alone in creating your own secondary graphic novel classrooms as long as Maureen Bakis is teaching and retooling alongside her kids in Topsfield, Massachusetts.

With great pleasure, I announce Maureen Bakis's place at the table, and I know I can speak for both of us when I say we welcome you to pull up a chair, dig in, and add your own flavor and dishes to the spread. Ultimately, after all, ethos in education or anywhere else doesn't come solely from any one him, her, or them, nor from the producers alone; it comes also from the collective us, the critical consumers who interact with information from multiple sources, look over multiple dishes, if you will, then decide what's best to chew on for a while and what's best to pass.

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