

James Bucky Carter

# Transforming English with Graphic Novels: Moving toward Our “Optimus Prime”

James Bucky Carter argues for the transformative potential of graphic novels in the English classroom. He advises teachers to be actively aware of the newer and lesser-known graphic novels and suggests approaches for examining the complex social issues the novels address.

I am one of many current teachers from a generation that cannot hear the word *transform* without thinking back to afternoons after school spent watching cartoons and reading comic books. During my childhood, *Transformers* was a popular animated television show that dealt with honorable, brave Autobots trying to save the earth from aptly named Decepticons. An avid comic book reader, I supplemented my knowledge of the series by reading Marvel’s more sophisticated comic book version.

I still read comics and their more refined, bigger sibling, graphic novels. As a classroom teacher, I used them to help transform students’ vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. As a college instructor in English education, I use graphic novels to transform licensure students’ ideas and understandings about literacy. I also teach the future teachers how to read these forms of sequential art narrative so that they too can use comics and graphic novels to expand their students’ literacy skills.

Graphic novels have great transformative potential for English classrooms and the students in them. Autobot leader Optimus Prime often used the directive “Transform and roll out!” to rally his troops and focus them on the myriad challenging jobs before them. When English teachers “transform and roll out” their prior notions of literacy and graphic novels, they transform their English classrooms and their students and move toward reach-

ing new, more-inclusive potentialities. Addressing questions from the call for manuscripts for this issue, I show in this article how teaching graphic novels can transform teaching and learning.

## Moving Beyond

“How are we teaching beyond tests to help adolescents deal with the challenges of being teenagers in difficult times or learn lessons that will help them live productive lives after graduation?” This is an important question. Here, it seems that graphic novels’ potential has yet to be acknowledged in many American classrooms. There are many high-quality graphic novels that focus on important issues relevant to teens, and teachers need to be aware of them.

Bryan Talbot’s *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, for example, is a highly literary graphic novel inspired by Beatrix Potter that details a young British girl’s attempts to come to terms with sexual abuse from her father. Never crude and never showing inappropriate images, this graphic novel seems to have slipped beneath the radar of many teachers, even though Bone creator Jeff Smith sang its praises before a packed audience of English teachers at the 2005 NCTE Annual Convention in Pittsburgh. So, too, has Katherine Arnoldi’s *The Amazing True Story of a Single Teenage Mom*, which details the author’s rise from difficult circumstances such as rape, abuse, and teen pregnancy to become a college graduate and published author. When a teacher

education student reviewed this title in my adolescent literature class, she spoke about how it moved her, how it was a simple-looking book with such a deep message. She also mentioned it would definitely have a place in her classroom and immediately drew connections between Arnoldi and *The Scarlet Letter's* Hester Prynne.

Despite some rough language, James Sturm's *Unstable Molecules* is an excellent example of dysfunctional family life that focuses on a "real life"

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version of the Fantastic Four, and *Ultimate Spider-Man Volume 1: Power and Responsibility* (Bendis) is a veritable metaphor for puberty and teenage angst as Peter Parker undergoes rapid changes in attitude, appearance, and social status. I have taught this book to college students as well as middle school and high school students. The older students often experi-

ence a time warp back to their middle school and high school days, which they say the book accurately portrays, and my sixth graders have been more than willing to enter into long discussions about how they empathize with Peter now that they have left the comfort of elementary school and have entered the "big time" middle school universe.

The dearth of essays on specific graphic novel titles in NCTE journals and elsewhere suggests that the transformative power of many graphic novels to help adolescents relate to adolescent issues is still relatively unexplored. To transform English classrooms, this will have to change: Teachers and other school officials must make room for these titles and more in reading lists, school libraries, and classroom libraries; teachers will have to start paying more

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## Achievement Gaps and Differences

What are English teachers doing to address achievement gaps and racial, gender, class, and language differences? Here teachers and scholars are more active in utilizing comics and graphic novels. Michael Bitz's *The Comic Book Project* has changed the attitudes and abilities of many urban students by helping them develop storytelling skills via the comic book format. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher and I have detailed other examples of how learning formal aspects of comics production aids student writing. Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm have shown that graphic novels attract male readers who are reluctant to read much else. The Maryland Comic Book Initiative has banked on comics to increase gains in reading motivation, interest, and comprehension among students. The work of countless librarians (among them see Michele Gorman; Michael R. Lavin; Stephen Weiner) has shown that students have an insatiable interest in these books. Scholars such as Stephen Cary, Stephen D. Krashen, and Jun Liu have shown how including sequential art aids ESL populations, and Jane P. Mitchell and Joseph D. George have even shown that superhero comics can help gifted students examine complex moral and ethical issues.

Still more can be done. Manga, comic book series mostly exported from Japan, is especially popular with young teens, even (and sometimes it seems *especially*) girls, and despite its rather difficult reading format and often nebulous themes, teachers need to capitalize on its popularity by familiarizing themselves with some of the more well-known series. Many of the themes in Manga are confounding and it is often confusing as to whether an image is or is not supposed to be erotic. Manga is to teachers today what music videos were a generation ago: something of import to students that we shouldn't ignore, even if we might not ever "get" it. How many teachers of my generation thought watching *Transformers* was frivolous? Yet here I am talking about sequential art's transformative potential. And the research of the scholars and teachers mentioned above suggests that graphic novels are indeed transforming the look and feel of the English classroom.

## Social Change and Justice

“How is teaching for social change or justice a transformative approach?” When Optimus Prime tells his troops to transform and roll out to go stop evil, I doubt he separates notions of social change, justice, and diversity. He does want to see a world where giant, autonomous robots can live in peace with all the peoples of earth, after all. The use of image has a long history in the fight for social justice. Consider flowers in gun barrels, raised fists, or that activist educator Paulo Freire used cartoon images to help teach literacy and social justice as entwined concepts to poor peasants in South America. In these traditions, there are many spectacular graphic novels that focus on difference and issues of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Almost everyone is familiar with *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale/My Father Bleeds History*, Art Spiegelman's frame narrative of his father's time in Europe before, during, and after the Holocaust. Barbara Brown has mentioned how scenes of racism in the novel helped students examine race relations in their lives as well as in William Faulkner's *Light in August*. Andrea Freud Loewenstein has illustrated how *Maus* helped students make sense of the riot-invoking tensions between Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights. Anyone who has seen Frey and Fisher's demonstrations knows that they have done excellent work in showing how excerpts from Will Eisner's many titles can get at issues of class and social power. But the journalistic works of Joe Sacco (*Safe Area Goražde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992–95; Palestine*) and Joe Kubert (*Fax from Sarajevo*), which tastefully but accurately detail the horrors of war and genocide, have received much less attention. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, a book with a strong Iranian female lead and great for discussing oppression in terms of gender, religion, and government, is well-known, but J. P. Stassen's just-as-powerful and timely *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* needs consideration as well. Robert Morales's *Truth: Red, White and Black* retells the story of Captain America by revealing that the government that created him tested the formula on African American soldiers before perfecting it with Steve Roger. Isaiah Bradley, the first Captain America, is a strong

example of the invisibility that members of minority cultures have felt and may still feel in our nation.

Teachers need a suitable lens through which to view these works if we are to use graphic novels to expose injustice and examine complex social issues. I suggest three ways by which to understand and teach them, three ways teachers can continue to use graphic novels to transform their attitudes, classes, and students. One approach is cross-curricular. English and history or social studies teachers should work together to exploit the potential of titles that make clear political statements or get at issues of national and international import. Another approach is to employ graphic novels as complements to traditional texts already used in the English classroom, such as pairing the Arnoldi graphic novel with a Nathaniel Hawthorne novel or *Truth: Red, White and Black* with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

One further approach is using contact zone theory as a lens. Contact zone theory is tailor-made for examination of injustice and conflict. It asks students and teachers to critically examine important issues from multiple social and personal points of view and to posit those views in a dialogic conversation with others who do the same. It asks for a questioning of authority, the status quo, and other power relations and does not shy away from conflict but seeks to examine it when it arises. Teachers should look to Mary Louise Pratt's and John Gaughan's work on and in the contact zone—engaged classroom to illuminate for them how comics and graphic novels help students “meet, clash, and grapple” (Pratt 4) with complex social issues and their attitudes toward and beliefs about them. As a format gaining more credibility but still often considered outside the realm of traditional English language arts texts, even discussing the use of a graphic novel with one's students acts as a means to enter a contact zone.

Recently the Mexican government issued a comic book that educated its citizens on how to

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border-cross effectively into the United States. Border crossing, both literally and figuratively, is a known quantity in English education (Giroux); it is also a construct intricately linked with entering the contact zone: as students and teachers share, compare, and examine their varying notions, they cross into new territory. It is possible that new hybrid forms of understanding or communication may take place in these border areas. Teachers must transform their practices and students' experiences by using works that come with borders and border crossings, that invite conflict and contact with hot-button topics. Though it stands as an excellent example on many levels, the Mexican authority's book is not unique; all graphic novels tell stories one bordered panel at a time, and often those stories cross into rich, exciting, and socially important territories. And what are graphic novels if not hybrid combinations of written and drawn discourse?

I have taught comics in the contact zone at the collegiate level, exploring connections among 9/11 and terrorist activities in the graphic novels of Alan Moore and getting students to examine their family units via Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* and the aforementioned *Unstable Molecules*. I have asked students to examine their thoughts on race by reading *Truth: Red, White and Black*. Students are amazed by how so much serious discussion can be generated from books once considered "funnies" and often remark how their readings have transformed their ideas about sequential art narratives as well as informed or changed their stances on issues. I am certain the contact-zone lens can allow for graphic novels to affect middle school and high school students' preconceived notions on life, justice, and comics, thereby influencing notions of reading as well.

### To Transform or Not to Transform?

How are graphic novels and comics transforming education? There is evidence that they are slowly filtering into many facets of English education and literacy instruction, changing the materials once used to reach various student populations, challenging traditional notions of literacy and competence in literacy skills, and even challenging student and teacher attitudes about the sequential art form. But surely there is more to be done. NCTE might directly acknowl-

edge and overtly mention graphic novels in future revisions of the *Standards for the English Language Arts, Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform*, the online "NCTE Guideline: Multimodal Literacies" and/or other policy statements. Recently I asked a class of future teachers to write essays on how graphic novels met these standards and tied into notions of multimodality. I hope to share our findings soon and would encourage other English educators to examine these documents to see how well graphic novels connect to them. In the meantime, Gretchen Schwarz and Dale Jacobs have each written recent articles in *English Journal* detailing how graphic novels are being used to increase various literacy skills, from functional to multimodal.

As teachers, we must challenge ourselves to continue to see beyond traditional notions of literacy and to embrace the visual. We should actively read graphic novels and bring those found suitable into our classrooms. We should take note of what students are reading for fun. We should explore the idea of comics in the contact zone. Teachers and scholars must also share the results of their labors in professional journals, many of which are now ready and willing to accept their findings.

A mystical, glowing force called "the matrix" is what powers Autobot leader Optimus Prime. The more graphic novels become integrated into the matrix of the English classroom, the more transformed English will become, moving away from notions of literacy that are only letter-based, from "one size fits all" literacy instruction, and from classroom libraries and reading lists devoid of panels and borders. In short, the English classroom that integrates graphic novels will be and is becoming a classroom with books that suggest the class is a place of acceptance, diversity, deep and multifaceted reading, and discussion that does not shy away from challenge.

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**James Bucky Carter** is the editor of *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel* (NCTE, 2007), a book that shares ideas for how to use graphic novels in the secondary classroom. He is finishing his PhD in English education from the University of Virginia and is currently a visiting instructor of English education at the University of Southern Mississippi. *email*: JBC9F@virginia.edu.

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

LISA STORM FINK, RWT

Carter details the use of graphic novels and comics in the classroom. An interesting idea is to have students examine the content of those texts. In "Comic Makeovers: Examining Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Media," students explore representations of race, class, ethnicity, and gender by analyzing comics over a two-week period and then re-envisioning them with a "comic character makeover." This activity leads to greater awareness of the stereotypes in the media and urges students to form more realistic visions as they perform their makeovers. These skills can also be applied to graphic novels and other texts. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=207](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=207)