For decades, literature circles have been used in language arts classrooms to give shape to children’s literary discussions while affording students utmost agency in textual interpretation and response. Literature circles are “small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same story, poem, article, or book” (Daniels, 2002, p. 2) and who maintain responsibility for interpreting literature collaboratively. While literature circles are highly adaptable and can function as freeform book clubs, others rely on role assignments to provide structure. In this latter arrangement, four to six group members typically adopt roles, each having “clearly defined and interlocking but very open-ended tasks” (Daniels, 2002, p. 99). When forming groups and assigning roles for readers to adopt, educators both employ established roles and create new ones all the time, as indicated by expansive online resources crowdsourced by teachers. Note that literature circle roles should highlight features of the format or genre children are discussing. A poetry discussion group, for instance, might use roles that focus on structure and figurative language. In this column, we propose six new literature circle roles for students discussing graphica in ELA classrooms.

Graphica: A Rising Literary Format

In recent years, the publishing industry has witnessed the rise of comics, graphic novels, and manga (categorized under the umbrella term graphica) for children and young adults. Bookstores have expanded graphica sections from a single shelf to an entire aisle, and traditional children’s book publishers have increased their output to meet growing demand (Reid & MacDonald, 2015). Language arts educators have responded by bringing graphica into their classrooms with greater regularity (Flannery, 2016; Miller, 2015). This represents a major shift in thinking. Although long popular with readers, graphica has traditionally “lain at the bottom of the literary heap” (Jiménez & Meyer, 2016, p. 424). For generations, graphica has been restricted, rationed, regarded as a trivial distraction, and otherwise delegitimized in ELA classrooms (Low, 2017; Tilley, 2012), to the extent that many viewed it as “fugitive reading competing with or even obstructing [official] literacy” (Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012, p. 431). When not banned outright, graphica has been positioned as a steppingstone to “better” prose-centric texts (Low, 2012), especially as support for “reluctant” or “struggling” readers.

In this column, we propose six literature circle roles for students to discuss comics and graphic novels (graphica) in ELA classrooms.

Language Arts Lessons

Literature Circle Roles for Discussing Graphica in Language Arts Classrooms

David E. Low and Katrina Bartow Jacobs
It is with relief that we see these attitudes shifting, as more educators celebrate graphica in its own right (Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011/2012; Yang, 2008). A concern, however, is that teachers are not necessarily foregrounding what makes the format unique and powerful in classroom discussions. While we applaud teachers for incorporating graphica in their curricula, we worry that too much emphasis is still placed on conventional text-based literary terms, such as plot, theme, and character development. While graphica certainly contains these features (Dallacqua, 2012), focusing on them alone fails to capitalize on the robust multimodal affordances of the comics medium. Multimodal texts require readers to integrate various semiotic modes (images, words, spatial arrangements, sound effects, etc.) to make sense of the text as a whole. Graphica is an inherently multimodal format, inviting readers to attend to how the comics medium “constitutes meaning in a way that is different from those of other media” (Tucker, 2009, p. 28). As with picturebooks, graphica demands that readers attend to the push-pull tension between words and images to fully engage the text in rich and complex ways (Boerman-Cornell, 2016).

Teachers who teach with graphica should develop students’ (and their own) specific vocabularies for discussing comics texts (Connors, 2012). We offer the following literature circle roles to help language arts educators highlight the multimodal affordances of graphica in their classrooms, along with starter questions accompanying each role. In keeping with the evolutionary tradition of literature circles, we encourage teachers to modify these roles and create new ones. To lend our discussion practical credence, we use Gene Luen Yang and Sonny Liew’s 2014 graphic novel The Shadow Hero as an exemplar and include sample analysis for each role.

**Literature Circle Roles for Graphica Discussion**

**Image Mage**

The Image Mage considers how images, icons, and figures are represented within a graphic text. Does the text consist of drawings, paintings, photographs, or mixed media? How do images make use of perspective, angles, close-up and faraway shots, and bird’s eye versus worm’s eye views? Are the drawings cartoony? Sketchy? Realistic? Do they employ visual symbols, clichés, or stereotypes? What sorts of lines does the illustrator use—thick or thin? Smooth or choppy? Is the setting detailed or spare? How does the illustrator use body language, facial expressions, and emanata (motion lines) to convey character traits, emotions, and actions? What is the reader’s emotional response to the imagery?

Using Figure 1 as an example, the Image Mage would focus on Sonny Liew’s illustration style and line work, including facial expressions, body language/positioning, mid-range and close-up shots (within the full and circular panels at the bottom of p. 325), and perspective. Analysis could be compared against Figures 2 and 3 to identify artistic consistencies and inconsistencies that contribute to the tone of the work as a whole.

**Gutter Dweller**

The job of the Gutter Dweller is to consider the layout of pages within a graphic text. The placement of panels and the blank spaces that separate them (known as gutters) provide the medium of comics with its “language.” Gutters are used to indicate the passage of time, change of venue or perspective, and various other transitions. From a reader response standpoint, gutters are one of the truly fascinating conventions of the form, requiring readers to make hundreds of inferences in a single text. The placement of panels on the page sets the narrative pace, conveys tone, and establishes the role of the reader as co-meaning-maker (Rosen, 2009). A page filled with identical rectangles reads differently than a page broken apart by diagonal borders or circular panels. Adjacent panels function differently than nested or interpenetrating panels, as do full-page illustrations versus multi-paneled pages. The Gutter Dweller considers the layouts of individual pages and of the work as a whole. Where are panels placed? What shapes are the panels? Are they geometric or erratic? Do pages have borders or are illustrations full-bleed? Is there a consistent pattern or are pages laid out differently?

Looking at Figure 1, the Gutter Dweller could compare the 6 panels on p. 324 (laid out at
Figure 1. Pages 100 and 101 from *The Shadow Hero* © 2014 by Gene Luen Yang. Illustrations © 2014 by Sonny Liew. Reprinted by permission of First Second, an imprint of Roaring Brook Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership. All rights reserved.
Figure 2. Pages 94 and 95 from *The Shadow Hero* © 2014 by Gene Luen Yang. Illustrations © 2014 by Sonny Liew. Reprinted by permission of First Second, an imprint of Roaring Brook Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership. All rights reserved.
<Wong? Wong! Where are you?>

<If you're drunk again, I swear I'm gonna-->

<--kill you?-->

<Y-your majesty! It's one of those g•wail•o superheroes! He got in somehow!>

<No, no! Not him! This one's got a green cape and a real bad sunburn!>

<Send reinforcements! Up to the second fl-->

<Go ahead. Finish your call. Tell your boss-->

Language Arts, Volume 95, Number 5, May 2018
Looking at the spread in Figure 1, the Palette Cleanser might identify the use of the color red to signify violence, or the effectiveness of rendering the tortoise spirit as a black apparition cleaving to the edges of a panel. Looking at Figure 2, they could consider the somber gray tone on page 326 and the comparably brighter tone on page 327 (in the full-color book, the center panel is red) and compare this spread to others in the graphic novel. Does the color red signify violence throughout the text? Is the color ever used in other ways?

Text Maven

There are multiple forms of language used in graphica, from expository captions to speech and thought balloons; from sound effects to interior monologue boxes. Each may have an assortment of linguistic and semiotic markers (such as color and font) to identify its narrator. When considering language in graphica, font and text size are important, as are the containers of the text. Thought balloons look different than speech balloons, for example, and may signal whispering, yelling, telephone conversation, or translation from another language. Some text in graphica is uncontained, such as onomatopoeia, signage, graffiti, and body art. The Text Maven discusses all linguistic elements and considers their role in contributing to the meaning of the graphic text.

In the double-page spread of Figure 2, there are no expository captions. The Text Maven might elect to focus on thought balloons, speech balloons (containing English that is marked by < > to indicate it is translated from Cantonese), signage in English that’s written in a font to suggest Chinese lettering, and the onomatopoeic sound effects of guns firing and bullets whizzing by. Janice Chiang’s hand-lettering adds a great deal of expressiveness to the spread.

Palette Cleanser

The Palette Cleanser considers the role that color and grayscale play in conveying narrative tone and characters’ states of mind. Are the colors muted and dark? Bright and dramatic? Cold or warm? Is a customary palette used throughout the work? Does the colorist ever stray from the palette, and to what effect? Certainly, all questions should come back to effect, as in “what effect does the coloring/shading have on the story?” The Palette Cleanser will naturally have a bit of overlap with the Text Maven when thinking about the coloring of words and speech balloons.

Synergizer

Much of graphica’s power comes from its ability to allow simultaneous competing meanings across different modes. The Synergizer considers relationships among images, words, layout, and other elements in contributing to a graphic text’s meaning. Mikkonen (2012) describes the visual and verbal elements that come together on the page as interpenetrating symbols that “allow a multiplication of perspectives” (p. 71). The Synergizer might contemplate authorial and artistic intent in such interpenetrations. Whose perspective is being elevated or reduced? Why would the cartoonist use an image instead of describing the scene with words? Does one mode dominate another? Is one character given more cues of salience than another? The Synergizer can be thought of as a gestalt analyst, discussing the work as the sum of its parts. In this capacity, they may also take note of peritextual elements, such as the book’s cover, spine, flaps, and endpapers.

Chapter 2 of The Shadow Hero (Figure 3) begins with a red title card containing English and Chinese lettering. There is an embedded floor plan of a house and an exposition box describing the layout of the house over an exterior shot of a building. There is dialogue between mother and son in speech balloons, with internal monologue from the son contextualizing the dialogue. The son’s perspective is given more weight than the mother’s through several semiotic modes (he has more words; he speaks to the reader directly; he always faces the reader). The Synergizer would take account of these competing multimodal features and speak to how they relate to one another.
Figure 3. Page 25 from *The Shadow Hero* © 2014 by Gene Luen Yang. Illustrations © 2014 by Sonny Liew. Reprinted by permission of First Second, an imprint of Roaring Brook Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership. All rights reserved.
Superfan

Comic books are infamous for having ardent fans who pore over back issues and learn vast interconnected mythologies. The Superfan is a role for connecting graphic to its larger contexts. Does the text reference or otherwise allude to other works, in any medium or genre? How has the text been talked about by readers, reviewers, and literary critics? The Superfan is encouraged to seek outside sources, such as online reviews, interviews, message boards, and fan sites. The Superfan asks: What elements are included in the text to situate the work in context, from forewords to author bios to explanatory essays and reader letters? What connects the text to the real-world events that surrounded its inception and release? Does it offer commentary on historical or contemporary events? If so, does it align with or contradict dominant narratives?

When discussing The Shadow Hero, it would be relevant to know that Gene Luen Yang was a 2016 recipient of a MacArthur “Genius Grant” who also writes Superman comic books, serves as the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature (2016–2018), and often speaks on the topic of diversity in children’s literature. It would be similarly important to trace the history of diverse representations in graphic, as well as contemporary discussions on the matter. It is no coincidence that The Shadow Hero revamps The Green Turtle, the first Asian American superhero, created in 1943. This is a story with a legacy, commenting on retrograde representations of Chinese American personae in American literature and comics. The graphic novel closes with a supplementary essay discussing the desire of the Green Turtle’s creator, Chu Hing, to create a Chinese character, his publisher’s decision to make the character white, and Hing’s subversion of that decision. The Superfan would research these contextualizing details and bring them into the group discussion.

Conclusion

We close with Tabachnik’s (2009) pronouncement that “one of the very pleasant discoveries that new teachers of graphic novels will make is that students usually do not have to be urged to read them . . . because graphic novels fit students’ sensibilities at a deep cognitive level” (p. 3). While this may be true, such reading is not inherently purposeful without supportive pedagogical structures. Daniels (2002) reminds us that literature circles can set “a cognitive purpose for the reading and an interactive one for group discussion” (p. 13). As language arts educators, we see our goal as cultivating our students’ social, analytical, aesthetic, and cognitive development. Bringing together graphic and literature circles, with roles that deliberately emphasize unique features of the literary form, is a concrete way toward meeting these goals while honoring the formats children find enjoyable and the many modes through which they make meaning.

For Further Reading


This anthology features critical examinations of children’s and YA graphic in terms of pedagogy, gender/sexuality, identity, structure, and transmedia. Essays reflect critical issues in comics scholarship and children’s literature from numerous disciplinary perspectives.
Unflattening is an experiment in visual thinking that argues against the primacy of words in Western culture. The book’s multimodal shapeshifting is meant to teach readers to perceive the world in ways beyond the usual, a type of narrow thinking Sousanis calls “flatness.” Unflattening is an inquiry into the ways humans visually construct knowledge.

References


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