

Using Graphic Novels to Illustrate Empathy

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Abstract. The graphic novel has long-served instructors as powerful teaching tools. Through graphic novels, students can pair visual images with words to examine how interdependent images and words can create a narrative. Graphic novels are essential for teaching students to think critically about personal experiences in the visual form, thereby teaching empathy. Graphic novels require visual learning to appreciate how the form addresses empathy. Graphic novels can be used to examine complex concepts. Artists can simultaneously depict stories internal and exterior conflicts of characters. This allows readers to become more empathetic to the characters. The visual form, as well as the accompanying narrative, provides an intimate medium to engross readers in parallel experiences. As educators struggle to engage students, the accessibility of graphic novels and their visually-rich narratives teach students both literacy and visual literacy. Through the images and the texts, students make connections and develop compassion for characters' experiences. It is the connection of text and image interplay that conveys a greater sense of empathy with readers. This book chapter will analyze creators' works in how readers learn compassion through the medium.

Keywords: Graphic novels, visual literacy, empathy, immigration, intercultural teaching and learning

The graphic novel is a powerful teaching tool; students can pair visual images with words and examine how interdependent images and words can create a strong narrative. Graphic novels are essential to teach students how to explore personal experiences. As students connect with the stories — which are often can be autobiographical — students learn to empathize.

The versatility of graphic novels make them accessible for students at various levels — middle school, high school, university — and can be used with native speaking students or second language learners. Approaches to using visual thinking strategies (VTS) to teach students to interact with graphic novels can occur at any age but given the demanding necessity to comprehend images and express what is depicted, introducing students to graphic novels earlier in their education set students up for understanding narratives, sequential images, and empathy.

For this book chapter, the term graphic novel will refer to both Western comics and Japanese manga. Graphic novels have been growing in popularity and are regarded as a rich medium that examine deep concepts. Rachel

Marie-Crane Williams (2008) identified graphic novels and comics to be around for over a hundred years but have often faced resistance in being accepted in educational or academic contexts. She mentioned Sabin, an art scholar, who noted that comics “are perceived as intrinsically ‘commercial,’ mass-produced for the lowest-common denominator audience, and therefore automatically outside the notions of artistic credibility” (p. 14). Further, Charles McGrath (2004), a former *New York Times* Book Reviewer, wrote that the surge in popularity with the comic and graphic novel results from “a critical mass of artists, young and old, uncovering new possibilities in this once-marginal form, and a new generation of readers...” (p. 1). In identifying the resistance in using graphic novels and comics as an academic tool, she discussed that comics and graphic novels carry connotations of being associated with children or younger audiences. The stigma makes it hard for the texts to be taken seriously. Furthermore, as comics and graphic novels rely on simpler illustrations, they are connected with caricature, also considered a “low” art. The language of comics and graphic novels are perceived as uncomplicated, and

therefore, empty of any literary appreciation. Finally, that graphic novels and comics are “a hybrid medium of images and words has for decades made them difficult to classify” (Williams, 2008, p. 14). However, starting in the 1990s, the perspective towards graphic novels and comics has shifted within academic and educational circles.

The Role of Empathy in Fiction

When examining how graphic novels can be used to teach empathy to students, it is first important to consider what is empathy and why it is necessary to teach to students. Barrows (1975) identifies this as the “single most difficult question in education” (as cited in *Stout*, 1999, p. 22). Caring about others in the community, and even ourselves, is necessary to human socialization. But can readers be taught to care, and how can this be done through visual mediums like graphic novels? Empathy entails the willingness to listen to others. Listening signifies respect for others’ differences (Stout, 1999). When we read, listen to music, enjoy a sculpture, we interact with the art, and in a way, encode it into our mentalities. When encountering poems and paintings, readers and viewers enter into an ongoing dialogue of what the human experience is and means. Insights from artists are subsumed into their works as a message for communicating impactful human experiences. Stout (1999) wrote about the arts “with their inextricable ties to the imagination, have the capacity to provide an unlimited source of possibilities for connecting self to other and for creating a disposition for sympathetic awareness” (p. 33). Art has this power to connect intimately with viewers and readers.

But responses to stories surpass just relational connections; indeed, when interacting with art, readers are stimulated in several regions of the brain. Scientists have begun to use MRI scanners to examine how brains are affected when people read, particularly when people read fictional narratives. Bal (2013) discovered in their study on fiction reading and empathy that in seeing or reading about

another’s experience, there is evidence that it activates the same neural structures in the viewer, which influences empathy. Reading, then, is a simulation of reality. Reading privileges people with opportunities to better understand other people and to potentially see the world from their perspective. It is also an opportunity to explore different solutions to personal problems. Fiction can help simulate cause and effect, assisting in the process of negotiating the complexities of social interactions (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2012).

Human brains are also hardwired to empathize with others. A study conducted by Professor Hasson Uri at the Princeton Neuroscience Institute (Dikker, 2014) examined the effect when one person listens to another person’s story. When listening to the story of another person, the activity of the two brains synchronize. The listener mirrors the brain activity of the storyteller. At first, the listener’s brain activity is delayed, but gradually, as the listener absorbs the information, as they perceive and understand the words, their brain begins to look like the brain of the storyteller, until finally, the listener’s brain will be able to predict the what the storyteller is going to say. The two brains are synchronized. It indicates that peoples’ brains are already constructed to mirror thoughts and emotions of another, is empathy. The next consideration for readers is becoming aware of these connections that exist with storytelling and empathy.

People may be programmed to experience empathy, but it is through narratives that people can make personal insights and become aware of themselves. Reading can improve empathetic skills, but only when, as Bal (2013) explains, “the reader is emotionally transported in a story” (p. 1). The act of the simulation allows people to gain a better understanding of the world and predict the actions and reactions of other people. Fiction, therefore, provides people with better knowledge of human psychology and how they should interact with other people. It is also a platform to allow people to explore and experience emotions without real-world intrusions.

Moreover, the role of fiction in empathy is explained in with the theory of the absolute sleeper effect: “when the effects of manipulation do not present themselves immediately but manifest themselves over time” (Bal, 2013, p. 3). People naturally organize information in stories, and this can be explained especially in ancient oral histories. Stories are retained longer in memory, and with better quality. While in the process of reading, readers’ minds are activated by creating simulations of the readings — as if the readers are actually embedded in the fiction.

Visual Literacy and the Graphic Novel

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is an approach to encourage learners to discuss works of art by looking carefully at images and verbalizing their observations and ideas. Working with others’ art learners interact and exchange interpretations of the images. The objective is to teach students to think critically about what they see — to “read” — and to comprehend the visual information using their own words.

Because so much of today’s information is communicated visually, it is necessary that students become visually literate. To analyze an image, students must be able to understand the intent of the images, as well as recognize the techniques employed to create the visual information. As visual literacy practices spread to other disciplines, literature and humanity subjects can make use of VTS through the use of graphic novels.

Graphic novels are often used in the classroom because they are popular with students. The genre of superhero comics particularly lends itself as a natural resource to engage a diverse population of students due to the genre’s popularity in the media and film. Moreover, graphic novels and comics are affordable and easy to acquire for classrooms; in recent years, many graphic novel creators have moved to using the internet or digital mediums for better reader accessibility. Thus, also addressing

accessibility. The language of graphic novels, while tackling profound subject matter, is easier to interact with and colloquial. Students are not intimidated by the informal language as they would with a classical novel. Graphic novels then become great tools, especially for language learners, by introducing students to new vocabulary and slang. In addition to all these facets which make graphic novels practical tools in the classroom, graphic novels also provide opportunities for meaningful discussions across disciplines (Williams, 2014).

When used within the curriculum, students can analyze the texts in many different ways. Students can examine the texts in terms of character, storyline, the intention of the creator, as well as the context in which the work was crafted.

Students learn how text and image interact and how to balance the reading of the two concepts simultaneously to enhance a single narrative. Graphic novels are also experiential. Students can engage with the graphic novel in many ways: either scanning the work or looking at the text first or the art first. Students can spend as much time as they want on a page, accessing its information; they can view it in terms of image detail or examine a page as an integrated design (Cary, 2004).

In most classroom settings, students are already familiar with reading texts. Yet, while western education emphasizes the understanding of visual information, classroom curricula may not include opportunities to decode visual cues through art or images. Students are inundated with visual information in their daily lives, but within their education, VTS is often excluded. Thus, graphic novels cross the boundary of text and visual; students learn to balance and decode text and images at the same time (Baker, 2014).

Students who are not regularly exposed to art, design, and images feel that they have inadequate vocabulary to describe what they see, and this can lead to students feeling uncomfortable or unfamiliar with images or art. Teaching through graphic novels can provide students with the vocabulary they need to relate what the image is doing, and more importantly,

why the image inspires emotional connections or reactions.

In preparation for teaching with graphic novels, educators should spend time reviewing the relationship of shapes, lines, and colors to deconstruct how “to read” images. The visual artist Bang writes in *Picture This* (2016) about how images correspond to perception and composition. Using the example of “Little Red Riding Hood,” Bang illustrates how using basic shapes, like triangles, and a trichromatic palette, she can depict the narrative of “Little Red Riding Hood.” She directs readers to think about the choices that she made to tell her story and the readers’ emotional response to her choices. In the picture below, Bang shows the scene of the

Wolf following Little Red Riding Hood into the woods as she journeys to her grandmother’s house. The position of the wolf in the foreground carries the immediacy of the danger, particularly in his shapes, which are pointed triangles. The single red eye suggests malicious intents. Meanwhile, Little Red Riding Hood, portrayed as a triangle in the background, is a red triangle, establishing a connection to the Wolf. Because Little Red Riding Hood is a small triangle, readers fear for her vulnerability against the big Wolf.

Educators should teach students color theory: how colors are used together to create harmony and contexts of how colors are used (for example, cultural context).

Figure 1. Using Basic Shapes to Tell Stories. In this image, Bang (2016) portrays the Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood using basic shapes. From PICTURE THIS ©2000 Molly Bang. Used with Permission from Chronicle Books, LLC.



Educators should direct students to consider the shapes of the drawings in graphic novels, whether characters appear “cartoonish” or realistic, and what that may mean for the effect and purpose that the creator was trying to achieve. For example, does a cartoonish character to portray a serious concept downplay the tone of the narrative? Does it make the material more available and relatable to the reader? Or does the creator choose to portray

images “cartoonish” to provide a particular perspective, for instance, the perspective of a child? Identifying how shapes are used in the context of the story will make the narrative overall, more compelling students.

Moreover, graphic novels tell their narratives through panels, frames, and layout — the composition of the work. Panels refer to the “boxes” that contain the images, while frames refer to line and borders that contain the panels.

Teaching students to be aware of how each box functions will allow them to understand the depth of the narrative. For example, panels may be used sequentially to tell the story of time passing. Or, they may be used to “zoom in” on a character to emphasize a thought or a detail. On the other hand, creators of graphic novels often take liberties with frames: frames can be “broken,” meaning that the character or subject will exit the frame and exist as part of the full page. Guiding students to be aware of how panels and frames are used for specific effects will help them to identify the purpose behind these effects. Students will build a better understanding of composition and the narrative as a whole (McCloud, 1993).

One approach to teaching students to read graphic novels visually is the See, Think, and Feel activity. Students should create a chart that is divided into three columns (See, Think, and Feel). Students will record their responses of how they are interacting and interpreting with the pages of the graphic novel. This activity is based on the visual thinking strategies (VTS) employed in museum education to teach art viewers how to engage with art. This particular activity is adapted from Harvard’s Project Zero’s “See, Think, Wonder (at)” approach to visual literacy (Project Zero, 2015). In the first column, See, students will only list what they can visually interpret, noting aspects of the visual information like color, lines, shapes, and layout. For the column, Think, students will try to understand why the images are portrayed as they have and what the creators’ intent may have been. Finally, for column Feel, students will note their emotional responses to the images. Educators can guide students to think about how the images portray empathy or how the power of the images invokes empathy. The strategy of this activity is similar to using evidence from the text to make inferences. Educators can go one step further by providing students with a textless page from a graphic novel and asking students to make predictions about what will come next in the narrative. The activity (and its extended activities) will help

students process the visual information of the graphic novels.

Once students have a grasp of visual terminology to describe what they see, students should examine design concepts to access the creators’ intentions in terms of composition. An approach to internalizing the visual process is to invite students to participate in the design production for graphic novels. This approach will enable students to understand how graphic novel concepts are conceived and then created.

A new concept that students will learn from creating their own graphic novels is how to “storyboard” their ideas to create their narrative. Storyboarding is a graphic representation of how the story will be narrated, shot by shot. Using squares (or frames), students will illustrate an image of what is going on in its scene, as well as the textual narratives (Cary, 2004). In teaching students to storyboard their graphic novels, it is easiest to ask them to think about how they would frame the narrative if this were a film. Students already have hours of experience watching television and film, and as such, can better articulate their stories. Students learn to break down scenes visually using the story-board method, examining how to use images to portray the story, as well as how to balance the text with the narratives. For educators interested in introducing comics and graphic novels into their curriculum, the Center for Cartoon Studies is an excellent resource. In one exercise, students are engaged in the text-image relationship by analyzing how the same image can reflect, contrast, and repeat the textual information. Students examine four images that are the same, and then asked to write text for the images in four different ways: 1) Redundant, words and images say the same thing, used to make the meaning clear; 2) Contrasting, words and images convey opposite meanings, teaching students irony and comedy; 3) Complementary, images and words are combined to tell an idea that neither alone could completely express; 4) Unrelated, there is no connection between the words and images in an obvious way, may be intended to show confusion (Hill, n.d.).

Figure 2. Practicing Text-Image Relationships. Students can reflect on how text and image can be used in conflicting, complimentary, parallel, and nonrelated situations. (Hill, n.d.). Fair use <https://www.cartoonstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/27.pdf>



1. Fill the thought balloon above with REDUNDANT text.



2. Fill the thought balloon above with CONTRASTING text.



3. Fill the thought balloon above with COMPLEMENTARY text.



4. Fill the thought balloon above with UNRELATED text.

Artists, such as Stan Sakai (2014) and Scott McCloud (1996), have well documented their graphic novel production process. McCloud, the author of two books: *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (1996) and *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (2006), provide a basis for students to understand how to produce graphic novels. McCloud (2006) writes, “The stances and expressions of characters — even when silent and in the background — can give readers a wealth of information about their emotions and attitudes. A minor detail in the art can foreshadow major developments in a story” (p. 29). McCloud describes how details of images can impact the reading of the narrative.

McCloud also spends time discussing the role of characterization and how readers visually interact with characters. Graphic novels, therefore, can teach students to recognize the emotions of characters as they struggle through a conflict in the narrative. This ability to “step into” the point of view of

characters can develop empathy for readers. Unlike other mediums like film or animation, readers can take their time with the text and images. Readers have the ability to fully know the characters, to understand their emotions, as well as the depth of the characters. These are all important for facilitating empathy within readers.

Empathy and Graphic Novels

Graphic novels require visual learning skills to appreciate how the texts address empathy. In an article published by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) (2013), ISTE notes that when reading graphic novels, students can develop critical thinking and literacy skills that can apply to view photos, paintings, and other people. Reading a graphic novel requires essential literacy skills. Readers need to be able to understand how events un-

fold, the plot, and interpret characters. Graphic novels, particularly graphic novels without text, encourage students to make inferences about characters' facial expressions (Baker, 2012).

Viewing another piece of art can evoke emotional responses. The colors, textures, composition, and subject matter all have the power to influence an immediate response. A method to developing empathy is by directing the response from something inarticulate to something communicated and shared. In describing what someone else has created — and listening to each other's points of views — students can connect by drawing upon their own stories and perspectives.

Graphic novels and comics are especially well-suited for stories with complicated concepts. There is as much power in the image as there is in the text; a single image can be more powerful than a textual description, but on the other hand, the text may be able to indirectly approach a subject which may be too “graphic” to show. In this way, graphic novels have been adept in exploring delicate topics like war and human rights. The images and the text of the narrative can convey information implicitly or explicitly, thereby buffering readers from inapproachable topics. The graphic novel memoir (or graphic memoir) has become very popular since the release of *Maus* (1991). Creators will often use graphic novels as a platform to delve into personal experiences and traumas to make it more relatable to readers.

There are many graphic novels that portray this point. In *The Best that We Could Do* by Thi Bui (2017) writes about her family's experience immigrating to America from Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Once they arrive in America, Bui details their struggle to assimilate and then reflects on how she will tell her family's story to her newborn son. Bui discusses family,

immigration, the trauma of emigrating, cultural identity, and self-identity (see Figure 3).

Other examples of graphic novels that confront empathy through the interplay of text and visual narratives are *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009). Joe Sacco presents the conflict in the Middle East at a human level. He immerses himself in Rafah, a town in the Gaza Strip which was the location of a massacre in 1956. As Sacco investigates the massacre, uncovering Gaza past and present, he gets to know the locals, telling their intimate stories as much as the conflicts in Gaza. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1991) is also another excellent example of conveying empathy. Spiegelman narrates the story of his father's experience in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. At the same time, he also examines his relationship with his father, which is fraught with frustration and tension because they are unable to communicate and connect. In the image below, readers all at once encounter how Spiegelman's character feels telling the story of the Holocaust as a graphic novel (a task that he does not feel entirely entitled to do), as well as his conflicting feelings towards his Jewish identity (he is a man, wearing a mouse mask; mice represent Jews in the story). Additionally, the text narrates another part of the story: the death of Spiegelman's mother (who was a victim of the Holocaust), his own depression (which may be a result of his parents' anxieties after the traumas they experienced), and finally, Spiegelman's stress at turning this successful narrative of the Holocaust into a profitable endeavor (which he does not want to do). Working through the text and the image, educators can ask students to think about the situation Spiegelman is in to understand the core of *Maus*.

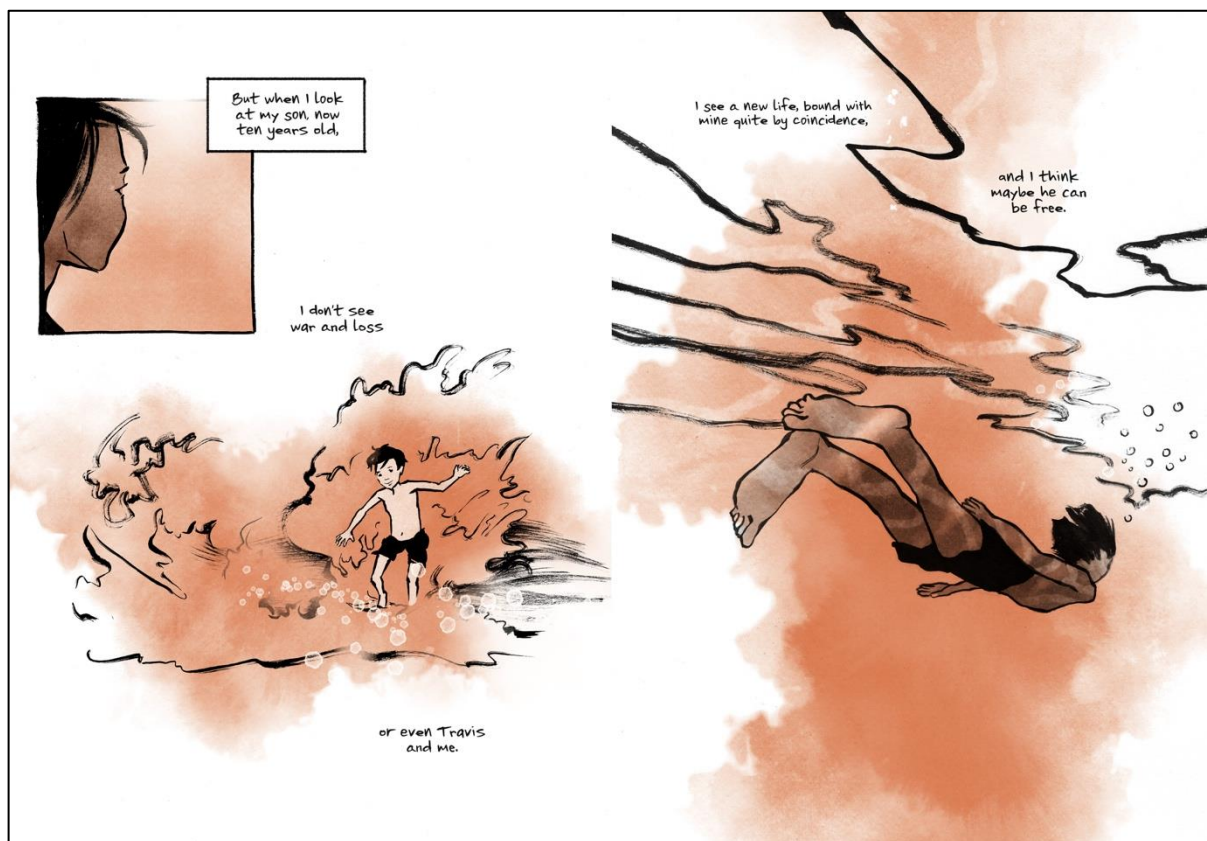


Figure 3. Using Graphic Novels to Explore Empathy. The image depicts Thi Bui's hope for her son's future without forgetting his connections to the past. Through choice in color and form, Bui's artwork reflects her own cultural background, establishing empathy with readers (Bui, 2017, p. 329). Reproduced with permission. *The Best We Could Do*, by Thi Bui © Abrams ComicArts, 2017.

Narratives like *Lighter than My Shadow* by Katie Green (2017) illustrates the experience of having an eating disorder, the process of recovery, and the trauma after rehabilitation. Written as a memoir, Green includes readers in her struggle towards recovery. Because anorexia and eating disorders are often socially misunderstood, Green is careful in illustrating her process to recovery so that her struggle can be understood. In the image below, Green plays with the title of the graphic novel, illustrating, readers feel as triumphant as Green's character when she learns to accept herself. There is also Maria Stoian's *Take it as a Compliment* by Maria Stoian (2015) explore personal trauma in memoir-style narratives. With Stoian and

Green, they are using art as therapy to heal personal wounds.

Using Visual Literacy to Teach Graphic Novels in the Classroom

In an introductory communication course, Digital Media and Communication, at Simmons University, first and second year students learn about a broad spectrum of media platforms and how they are used to convey narratives through image and word. Students spend the early part of the semester learning narrative and design elements before they examine pictures books and graphic novels and create one of their own as a project.

They learn how to deconstruct an image using the techniques assessed by Bang (2011), analyzing how artists use color, lines, and shapes to convey information. Students spend a third of the semester exploring different types of picture books, comics, and graphic novels to learn about the varieties of technique, design, and narrative structure that exists. The semester culminates with a graphic novel project that students create. Students analyze the design and narrative elements of a graphic novel, assessing how word and image are balanced to portray a narrative.

Students become excited about reading *Take it as a Compliment* (2015) because of the creators' use of vibrant colors and design, only to become disconcerted by the narrative context. Stoian's brilliant graphic novel examines personal stories of sexual abuse. When asked to examine why there is a disconnect between the design and narrative, students pointed out that the colors and design, especially the simple illustrations, "soften" the narrative of sexual abuse and allows the stories to be more "accessible" because they are not necessarily "triggering" for survivors of sexual abuse. Students commented that the experiences portrayed permitted for a larger discussion of sexual abuse and how to manage these experiences.

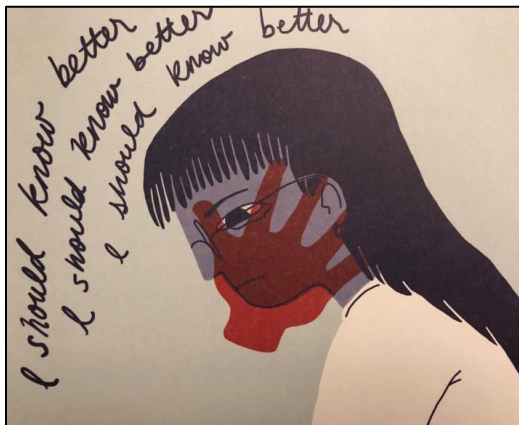


Figure 6. Understanding How Images and Colors are Used with the Narrative. Students were able to discuss the experiences in this narrative about sexual abuse and trauma because the images were careful to only suggest what needed to be conveyed. Maria Stoian, *Take it as a Compliment*, p. 51, 2015. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Considering the image above, students were impressed how the creator conveyed the topic of sexual abuse and trauma without being fully explicit, given that some images may have had a triggering effect. Students were able to empathize with the characters from the story, identifying situations that they or friends have experienced. Many used the images as a method to discuss how people can support victims of sexual abuse and trauma: by listening to their stories.

Conclusion

As David Swanger (2008) writes, art is essential to a moral education. Successful art should create a connection between the viewer and the artist, as well as the characters or subject matter (Swanger, 2008). In graphic novels and comics, readers watch characters struggle with their reactions to events. The visual form of these stories, as well as the accompanying narrative, provides an intimate medium that engrosses readers as they examine their own paralleling experiences.

Stout (1999) writes that there are "two inextricably intertwined purposes for education: the development of critical intelligence and the nurturance of the human capacity to care. It is caring, not only for one's self, but for others and community" (p.23). Graphic novels and comics are already known to be important mediums in conveying critical concepts to students. It is through images and words that students can make connections with the world and with others. It is also how they can learn to empathize with others. As studies in neuroscience indicate (Dikker, 2014; Paul, 2014), fictional narratives can make a more significant impact on the development of empathy. Using graphic novels through the lens of visual literacy to teach students about empathy can have a greater impact. Images can be more potent than words, but educators must give students the words to describe what they see to understand artists' intent and students' reactions. By communicating what they see with others, students will have the agency to share their own perspectives while building off of the conversations of their peers. Graphic novels are a mixed medium that bridge image and text

together. The visual thinking strategy approach to graphic novels can also be an introduction for students to other forms of art.

Graphic novels and comics allow for in-depth interpretation, in terms of subject matter, design, and as works of literature. Teaching students visual literacy skills through graphic novels empowers students to interact with images in a meaningful way and understand and express the visual information. Using graphic novels to illustrate empathy empowers readers to establish critical connections and personal experiences, to learn from others to learn more about themselves. As readers gain personal insights from others, they, in turn, learn to love and respect others for their individual experiences.

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