Grade 7 Students Reading Graphic Novels: ‘You Need To Do a Lot of Thinking’

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Abstract
A multifaceted, classroom-based research project explored how developing Grade 7 students’ knowledge of literary and illustrative elements affects their understanding, interpretation and analysis of picturebooks and graphic novels, and their subsequent creation of their own print texts. Analysis of two sources of data, the students’ written responses to Amulet (Kibuishi 2008), one of the graphic novels read and discussed during the study, and the students’ opinions about the knowledge that is required to read and understand a graphic novel, indicated how the instruction about various graphic novel conventions had impacted the students’ awareness of and knowledge about the structural design of these multimodal texts.

Keywords
Graphic novels, multimodal texts, middle years students, picturebooks, reading, writing, classroom-based research

The graphic novel has experienced rapid growth in popularity among children and adolescents. According to Weiner (2004), the demand for and acceptance of graphic novels is due to several complementary events: the increased accessibility and visibility of graphic novels, the production of movies that have inspired interest in superhero comics, novelists using ‘the comic-book industry as the impetus for serious novels … and journalists writing articles about the changing field of comics’ (p. 114). As is discussed in this article, many researchers and practitioners have written about the pedagogical possibilities of using graphic novels in classrooms. Indeed, one of the Grade 7

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participants in my research stated, ‘Maybe there isn’t a lot of writing [in graphic novels], but you need to do a lot of thinking.’

During two classroom-based research projects with Grade 7 students (12-year-old children/Year 8 in UK), the middle years’ students read a collection of postmodern picturebooks1 as well as four graphic novels: *The Arrival* (Tan 2006), *Babymouse: Queen of the World* (Holm and Holm 2005), *Amulet Book One: The Stonekeeper* (Kibuishi 2008) and *Coraline* (Gaiman and Russell 2008). Throughout the research the students had opportunities to learn about the ‘grammars of various semiotic systems’ in the picturebooks and graphic novels they read and discussed, and to develop a concomitant metalanguage (The New London Group 1996: 74) to discuss aspects of the modes of image and writing. The students used this metalanguage when reading, writing about, and discussing the picturebooks and graphic novels. Carter (2009), Seyfried (2008), Thompson (2008), and Jacobs (2007), among others, have written about the value of explicitly teaching graphic novel conventions to students. According to Esquivel (2006), graphic novels ‘constitute a unique medium of communication with its own aesthetic form, codes and conventions, language and ideology. They are a hybrid of image and word, of art and literature’ (p. 36). Learning about graphic novel conventions and art elements, and about how to engage in critical and analytical reading of these multimodal texts, can contribute to students’ understanding of how information can be designed and how representations structure our perception and interpretation. However, in order for students to learn ‘how to analyse the ways images make meanings, they need to gain knowledge of the visual meaning-making systems deployed in images’ (Unsworth, Thomas, Simpson and Asha 2005: 10).

Although the graphic novel *Amulet* (Kibuishi 2008) was read and discussed by both classes of Grade 7 students who participated in the research, this article features data gathered during the second year of the study because 12 of the 25 students in this class identified *Amulet* as their favourite book or one of their favourite books that they read during the study. This article presents the findings from the analysis of the students’ written responses to *Amulet*, and discusses the students’ opinions about the knowledge that is required to read and understand a graphic novel. A brief overview of the guiding theoretical frameworks and a discussion of the relevant literature on graphic novels are followed by a description of the research, and by the analysis and discussion of two sources of student data.

**Theoretical perspectives**

Several complementary theoretical frameworks informed the research that was conducted with the Grade 7 students. The studies were situated in an overall ecological approach to language and literacy (Barton 2007) and a sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978). According to Syverson (2008), ecological approaches to literacy ‘expand our awareness beyond the individual learner, teacher and text, or even the ‘small group’ and ‘facilitator’ to consider
connections, relationships, flows and dynamics of change over time in the various levels of systems-within-environments’ (p. 110). Those teachers who embrace a sociocultural theory of learning are cognizant of how the nature of classroom communities, such as the prevalent discourses, affects the learning of individual students. Indeed, these interrelated theories respect how language and literacy are social practices (Barton and Hamilton 2000), and recognise how students’ engagements with particular kinds of texts are embedded in specific contexts of social interactions and activities. As McRobbie and Tobin (1997) write, ‘while knowledge is personally constructed, the constructed knowledge is socially mediated as a result of cultural experiences and interactions with others in that culture’ (p. 194).

Rosenblatt’s (1978) theory of the literary transaction is consistent with an overall ecological approach to language and literacy as it includes attention to the social and cultural contexts of the reading event. She (1985) adopted Dewey’s term ‘transaction’ to describe the reciprocal relationship between reader and text, and explained how a new experience, the poem, is evoked during the transaction between text and reader. While Rosenblatt’s transactional theory emphasizes the dynamic role of the reader, it also recognises the synergistic contributions of the text and the context to the reading event. She wrote of the particularity of the evocation and of the diversity of reader response as each reader brings a unique ‘cultural, social, and personal history’ of literary and life experiences (1994: 1064) to each unique reading event.

**Graphic novels as multimodal texts**

The three theoretical frameworks discussed above recognise how texts, such as the four graphic novels read by the Grade 7 students during the research, are a fundamental element of the classroom context. The graphic novel, according to Thompson (2008), is one of several formats within the larger medium of graphica, ‘a medium of literature that integrates pictures and words and arranges them cumulatively to tell a story or convey information’ (p. 6). Graphic novels are multimodal texts because the mode of writing and the visual mode of image (Kress 2003) are combined in many different ways, and both modes are necessary for the representation and construction of meaning (except in wordless texts). Larsson (2007) described the act of reading a graphic novel as ‘an essentially synthetic activity that dynamically integrates the comprehension of word and image’ (p. 45).

The two modes of image and writing are each organized and regulated by discrete logics, and each mode has ‘differing modal resources’ for making meaning (Bezemer and Kress 2008: 171). Through diverse ‘material and cultural affordances’ (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010: 185) each mode’s organised set of semiotic resource offers different potentials and constraints for communication and representation (Kress 2003). According to van Leeuwen (2005), ‘studying the semiotic potential [for meaning making] of a given
A semiotic resource is studying how that resource has been, is and can be used for purposes of communication (p. 5) in a specific context. The concept of transmediation, ‘a special case of semiosis in the sense that learners use one sign system [or semiotic resource] to mediate another’ (Siegel 1995: 461), seems to accurately portray the synergistic relationship between the semiotic resources of writing and images in graphic novels.

The description by Heath and Bhagat (2005) of how readers read comic books is relevant to graphic novels. The authors explain that, ‘close study of eye movements in reading comics indicates that the eye moves between words and pictures rapidly, so that neither the word nor the picture text remains linear in a left-to-right pattern’ and readers ‘often do a double reading and follow several narratives at a time (p. 590). Heath and Bhagat state that to understand sequential art, ‘readers must process the meanings of the staccato rhythm of unconnected moments that come between the panels,’ the gutters, and ‘the imagination of the reader fills the visual gaps’ (p. 588). Readers must sustain the narrative across the spaces between the panels, ‘spaces that are always literal but also often metaphorical’ (Esquivel 2006: 36). Interpretation of both the verbal and visual texts in graphic novels ‘depends on gaps and fill-in, on absences and presences’ (Heath and Bhagat 2005: 589), as readers must generate connections among the images and between the text and the images, and create ‘links between each panel and the page as a whole’ (Brenner 2006: 125).

**Graphic Novels and Pedagogy**

Teachers, school librarians, and researchers have identified many potential benefits associated with using graphic novels in the elementary, middle years and high school curricula. The diverse range of topics and issues explored in graphic novels offers readers a wide array of choices, and makes these texts appropriate for teaching topics in various curricular areas (Christensen 2006; Schwarz 2002) and for establishing interdisciplinary connections (Esquivel 2006).

Most importantly, Brenner (2006) has emphasized that reading graphic novels entails *reading*. Graphica has been shown to appeal to both genders, and to students from diverse backgrounds and cultures (Thompson 2008). Although many individuals have written about how graphic novels engage and motivate reluctant readers (Crawford 2004; Lyga 2006; Schwarz 2006; Snowball 2005), both Brenner and Carter (2009) emphasize that graphic novels are for readers of all ability levels and ages. One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of including graphic novels in the curricula focuses on how the visual nature of these multimodal texts enhances comprehension. A study by Edwards (2009) revealed how reading graphic novels and comic books impacted the intrinsic motivation, reading comprehension, and vocabulary development of seventh-grade students. Seyfried (2008), who also worked with middle grades students, noted how the students participating in a ‘Graphic Novel Book Group’
learned that ‘rereading and slow reading support close observation, a necessary skill of visual literacy’ (p. 47). According to various researchers and practitioners, graphic novels can:

- assist students with visualization (Christensen 2006; Lyga 2006);
- promote language and literacy development (Crawford 2004; Gorman 2008; Schwarz 2002, 2006), including vocabulary development (Brenner 2006);
- support readers who have limited language proficiency (Christensen; Lyga);
- offer English Language Learners picture support and less text, as well as exposure to authentic and conversational discourse and ‘nuances of the English language’ (Thompson 2008: 18);
- develop critical thinking and comprehension skills (Carter 2007; Jacobs 2007; Schwarz 2006);
- teach readers about literary techniques, terms and elements (Baird and Jackson 2007; Bucher and Manning 2004; Carter; Esquivel 2006; Schwarz 2002);
- foster multiple literacy skills (Bucher and Manning 2004; Crawford; Jacobs; Lyga; Schwarz 2002, 2006; Schwartz and Rubinstein-Avila 2006);
- provide opportunities for media literacy education (Carter; Schwarz 2007);
- serve as a resource to explore both historical and current social and cultural issues (Boatright 2010; Hughes and King 2010); and
- scaffold writing instruction (Frey and Fisher 2004).

The research
The findings discussed below extend the research that has explored the use of graphic novels in school. During the study the Grade 7 students had opportunities to develop their understanding and appreciation of picturebooks and graphic novels, to extend their comprehension, interpretive, and creative skills as they discussed and responded to the literature, and to apply their learning by designing their own multimodal print texts. As well as learning about various metafictive devices (Pantaleo 2008), the students were introduced to some illustrative techniques and art elements, and to a few compositional conventions and codes of graphic novels. Because this article focuses on aspects associated with the students reading the graphic novels, very little information is provided about the teaching and learning activities that involved the picturebooks or about the students’ creation of their own multimodal texts. Further, length restrictions limit the description of the investigative procedures (see Pantaleo 2011, and Pantaleo and Bomphray in press for more details).

The context
The Grades 6–8 public school where the research was conducted is both culturally and ethnically diverse. The middle school is located in a predominantly upper-middle class area in a city located in western British Columbia, Canada. For 11 weeks from September–December, 2009, I worked with Mrs. K., the classroom teacher, and her students for five mornings/week
for approximately 390 minutes/week. Of the 25 Grade 7 student participants, 16 were girls and nine were boys. Because the research began at the start of the school year, Mrs. K. did not describe the students’ academic achievement in Reading and Writing until the end of the study. She provided me with the students’ marks on their December report cards: eight students – C (Satisfactory Performance), nine students – C+ (Good Performance), seven students – B (Very Good Performance), and one student – A (Excellent Performance).

Research investigative procedures
At the beginning of the study, instructional time was devoted to developing the students’ understanding about personal response and about the qualities of a ‘good’ written response (i.e. articulating one’s opinions, emotions, thoughts about a text and giving supportive explanations), and to constructing collective guidelines for small group discussions. Willy the Dreamer (Browne 1997) was used to introduce the students to the semiotic notion of intertextuality and to underscore the importance of looking closely at illustrations in picturebooks. The sequence of the other picturebooks used in the research was as follows: Shortcut (Macaulay 2005), Flotsam (Wiesner 2006), Re-zoom (Banyai 1995), The Red Tree (Tan 2001), Voices in the Park (Browne 1998), The Three Pigs (Wiesner 2001), Chester (Watt 2007), Chester’s Back (Watt 2008), Black and White (Macaulay 1990) and Wolves (Gravett 2005). Before reading The Three Pigs, the students read and talked about Tuesday (Wiesner 1990) in order to facilitate their appreciation of Wiesner’s trio of postmodern pigs. In order to be familiar with the character of Desperate Dan, the students read Why the Chicken Crossed the Road (Macaulay 1987) before reading Black and White. For most of the focus picturebooks, the students read the book independently, completed a written response, and participated in peer-led, small group discussions. Following the digitally-recorded discussions, the students participated in whole class activities that focused on various metafictive devices used in the literature. Concisely, metafiction is concerned with ‘fiction-making itself’ (McCaffery 1995: 182). Through various devices or techniques, authors and/or illustrators of metafictive texts concomitantly construct and expose ‘fictional illusion’ (Waugh 1984: 6).

With respect to art elements, the students completed an exercise designed by Molly Bang (1991, 2000) that involves the building of an illustration from Little Red Riding Hood. By following Bang’s (2000) instructions for sequencing a picture construction, the exercise effectively reveals several art principles by requiring students to change the size, colour, shape and perspective of objects on their pages. Other mini-lessons that focused on colour, perspective, point of view and line were limited in depth due to time constraints. However, the students had opportunities to learn about the cultural meanings and significance of assorted colours, and to explore the various techniques that artists use to create perspective in images. Most of the students expressed unfamiliarity with the use of the term perspective as a way to describe the
creation of depth and distance in 2-D images. With respect to point of view, we discussed how authors and illustrators position readers or manipulate readers’ orientation in relation to the telling of the narrative and/or to the viewing of an image, and we reviewed various terms to describe point of view. Finally, near the beginning of the study Mrs. K. had conducted a lesson on line and engaged the students in a discussion about various types of lines, vocabulary to describe lines, and the potential of lines to evoke different emotions.

In addition to the picturebooks the students also read, responded to and discussed the following four graphic novels: *The Arrival* (Tan 2006), *Babymouse: Queen of the World* (Holm and Holm 2005), *Amulet Book One: The Stonekeeper* (Kibuishi 2008) and *Coraline* (Gaiman and Russell 2008). Several participants indicated that they had never read a graphic novel but overall, the students conveyed familiarity with graphic novels as a format of literature. Through a variety of instructional activities, the students had opportunities to learn about a few compositional conventions and codes of graphic novels. Although the students were introduced to the terms panels and gutters when working with *The Arrival*, much of the initial instruction and discussion about graphic novels focused on *Babymouse*. Activities with the picturebooks had developed student understanding of how typography can be used to communicate meaning but further consideration of this element was explored by looking at examples of typographic experimentation in *Babymouse*. The students also discussed the purposes of narrative boxes, the significance of various shapes and sizes of speech bubbles, the use of sound effects, and the use of line to show emotion and motion/action. After reading and discussing a handout from McCloud’s (2006) book about techniques that can be used to create intensity in panels such as ‘wild variations of frame size and shape,’ ‘borderless and border-breaking characters and objects’ (i.e. breaking the fourth wall), extreme depth cues, exaggerated poses and expressions, graphic contrast, virtuoso drawing technique, and diagonals (p. 46), the students searched for examples of intensity in *Babymouse*. When discussing the graphic novels in their small groups, the students were expected to talk about the graphic novel features described above, as well as the art elements and literary devices that they had learned about throughout the project.

Once all of the selections of literature had been read, the students completed a questionnaire that asked them to identify their favourite book (picturebook or graphic novel) and to describe how they read picturebooks. The students were also asked to generate comments that could be conveyed to individuals who might not appreciate the knowledge that is required to read and understand graphic novels.

For the culminating activity of the research, the students were to apply their learning and to create their own multimodal print text. During a digitally-
recorded individual interview, the students talked about their multimodal books, showed and explained to me the metafictive devices in their work, and described how they had addressed the other required elements of the assignment (e.g. colour, line, point of view, perspective, graphic novel compositional conventions). Finally, the students completed an end-of-study questionnaire that asked them to describe themselves as readers and writers, and to identify and explain the aspects of their multimodal books that they were most pleased with.

As both a teacher and the researcher in the study, I acknowledge my influence on the classroom community and the Grade 7 students’ learning. I recognise that the ‘ideologies demonstrated and valued’ (Rowe 2008: 70) by both Mrs. K. and me influenced the students’ stance toward the literature they read, their discussions about and written responses to the literature, as well as the content of their multimodal books.

Before describing how the relevant data were analysed, a brief description of *Amulet* follows in order to assist those readers who are unfamiliar with the graphic novel to better understand and appreciate the findings of the data analysis.

*Amulet*

A tragic car accident is portrayed in the prologue of Kazu Kibuishi’s graphic novel. Two years after the traumatic death of her father, Emily, her brother Navin, and her mother Karen, relocate to a remote house that belonged to Emily’s great-grandfather. Emily discovers a magical amulet and learns that mystery surrounds the house and the disappearance of her great-grandfather. While investigating a noise in the basement during their first night in their new residence, Karen is swallowed by an arachnid-like monster. Emily and Navin pursue the kidnapper into the alternate-Earth land of Alledia. In this parallel and fantastical world Emily meets her great-grandfather and just before he dies, she learns of her potential as a leader of Alledia.

Accompanied by Miskit and Cogsley, two robots created by their mysterious great-grandfather, Emily and Navin embark on the dangerous journey to rescue their mother. Their adventure involves encounters with several adversaries including an elf prince with pointy-ears and shark-like teeth. The evil prince wants Emily to join forces with him so that he can destroy his own father. With the assistance of the amulet, Emily defeats the dark prince in battle. However, her mother has been poisoned and is in a coma. The great-grandfather’s house in Alledia transforms ‘into a robotic form of transportation’ (Spisak 2008: 338) and Emily, Navin and their allies embark on a mission to secure an antidote in the distant city of Kanalis.

*Amulet*, a classic quest tale, contains ‘stellar artwork, imaginative character design, moody color and consistent pacing’ (‘Amulet’ 2008: 48). In her review
of *Amulet*, Kilby (2007) wrote that, ‘the artist’s use of color, moving from the poignant warm blues and whites of comfort and family to the smoky browns and blacks of tragedy and mystery, is subtle but highly effective’ (p. 446). Indeed, in this quick-paced and suspenseful graphic novel, the ‘dark pictures aid in portraying the dark shadow of the story and help to set the mood’ (Thomas 2008: 67).

**Data Analysis**

Although multiple sources of data were collected during the research, below I describe the analysis procedures and findings of only the data sources that are relevant to this paper.

**Students’ written responses to Amulet**

After reading *Amulet*, the students wrote a personal response to the graphic novel before discussing the book in their small groups. Although all of the students read the graphic novel, three students were absent from school on the day when responses were written to *Amulet*. The 22 students’ written responses were read multiple times in order to develop an overall impression of the content of the work. Overwhelmingly, the students’ comments focused on art elements and/or graphic novel compositional conventions. With respect to the depth of their visual consideration and analysis, the students’ work represented a continuum that ranged from describing to interpreting the meaning or significance of the elements or conventions on various pages. Spelling and punctuation have been standardized in the excerpts from the students’ responses that are featured below. All student names are pseudonyms.

Eighteen students remarked on the art element of colour and their comments varied from describing the colours to inferring the significance of particular colours. The excerpts below, which are representative of the students’ observations, show that the students wrote about how the colours in Kibuishi’s artwork evoked aesthetic responses, communicated mood, atmosphere and emotion, and symbolised deeper meaning.

**Blake:** *I thought the page that was the most interesting was the final page, which was a double-page spread with a beautiful stream, a forest setting (however it is disrupted by a giant-walking castle). The beautiful shades of this picture mesh with each other therefore contributing even more to the standout giant. . . .I like the contrast and darkness as well as the turquoise colouring in this picture because it contributed to the eerie feeling and mystery to this scene.*

**Layla:** *The author uses a lot of blues and dark shades of gray in the scenes where they are in Alledia. It gives everything an underground look. At the part when they arrive in the house, the author uses a lot of bright yellows and oranges to show it is a sunny day and there are lots of things shadowed (house at the start of the book).*
**Morgan:** Colour was another factor that showed many emotions in this book. On page 40 you can tell how the words and the amulet are connected with the bright glow coming off it and also coming off the speech bubble. It represents how powerful the amulet really is. Page 113 gives you a horrifying demand image coming from how bright, scary, and cat-like the evil elf man’s eyes are. You couldn’t tell if it was just white because the glow it gives off really changes the way it would look if the eyes were dull or off-white.

**Kaylee:** I loved the waterfall panel because to me the colours are sort of telling me that even if something is dark or hidden in the shadows its inner beauty will always shine through.

As described previously, the students participated in instructional activities that focused on perspective (depth and distance) and point of view. In general, the eight students who wrote something about depth identified and explained examples of how Kibuishi had created depth in his artwork.

**Cadan:** Another one of my favourite pages is page 12. I like this because of the colour and perspective used, the light and dark colours really complement each other; it uses perspective by showing distance in the background by having the city. It shows how high up they are because the city looks like little lights. On page 126 it shows depth cues and the sense of great distance because you can see the plane close and then in the distance very far away you can see tiny pieces of tentacles.

**Kaylee:** One of the pages I liked was page 68 because both the first and second to last panel show depth contrast. The first panel shows depth because the cliffs are drawn at the bottom and coming out the sides and Navin is drawn big and in the top corner. The second to last panel shows depth because Navin is drawn close up and the evil bird is drawn smaller so it looks like it is coming behind Navin.

Overall, the responses of the five students who commented about point of view revealed an appreciation and understanding of the effects of Kibuishi’s use of this element in his artwork.

**Morgan:** This book also showed a lot of depth through bird’s eye views and vortexes. I think the author did this to really create a realistic fantasy world.

**Santino:** The angles of where the pictures are at are great because it made the whole graphic novel like a movie! Especially the panels where Emily was carrying her mom and Navin and Miskit came to help her and then the rest of the pictures just zoomed away from the characters in the pouring rain. Now that was a great part in the whole story, if not the best part in the story.
The students also commented on particular details in the artwork. Five students wrote about how the expressions of the characters were conveyed effectively in the illustrations and four students interpreted the meaning of Kibuishi’s use of line in particular images.

**Kaylee:** I liked the 7th panel on page 75 where the big slug creature has a leaf hanging out of its mouth because it seems like it is insulted. I found this funny because Emily pointed out that they might be diseased and then the slug just looks at her like, ‘How dare you! I am not diseased.’

**Annika:** For me the book has a very radiate effect because there are so many shiny colours and in all the pictures you can see what the people are feeling. For example, on page 53 Navin is scared and you can see this on these lines around his head.

The responses of eight students included comments about the paneling in *Amulet*. As explained above, during the class discussion of *Babymouse* (Holm and Holm 2005), the students had examined how various aspects of panels, including the size, shape and border style, can be manipulated to ‘elicit different levels of involvement or response from readers’ (Bongco 2000: 60). The students had also talked about the significance of groups of panels on various pages. The excerpts below reveal the students’ interpretations of the shapes and the sequencing of the panels.

**Kylie:** There was also a lot of frame variation too. For example, on page 5 the frames look like they are all cracked and shattered and I think that is the way that Emily remembers all of it. I also think the way the panels are give it a fast and quick look.

**Annika:** I think on page 162 the last picture you can see that he is angry and she is scared. And the panel from this picture looks like the Elf man vs. Emily.

**Riley:** I think this book is amazing because of the intensity, depth cues, and frame variation. This book is very well done by the frame variation on page 4 and 5 because the panels are crooked and they almost look like smashed glass, which I think was the point because it fits in with the pictures of the car accident.

As mentioned previously, instructional time was devoted to exploring techniques that can be used to create intensity in panels (McCloud 2006). Eight students made general comments, some descriptive and some interpretive, about the intensity in the panels in *Amulet*. Of these eight students, three commented specifically on the extreme poses of characters and three noted the use of the virtuoso drawing technique. Four student examples follow.
Morgan: Another page I thought really showed the WOW-factor was page 78. There was not any paneling at all. I thought this made you feel as though you were really there. Also, the intensity of this picture makes you feel the emotions Emily and Navin must have felt. I thought this was a virtuoso drawing.

Keira: I found that the author of this book made some images so intense, some images used more than one of the intensity techniques. For example, page 169 on the first panel is an extreme pose. There is also graphic contrast with the red and the blue and it is almost like a demand image but from farther away.

Kylie: There was a lot of intensity in the book, for example when they are running away from the wall behind them and it is closing up. I think the author used the depth contrast really well in that scene because it was really intense. On almost every page there was [sic] extreme poses. I think he used the poses to show and exaggerate how all of the people are feeling so then you can understand the character’s actions more.

Blake: If you think about it, this final double page spread breaks the fourth wall and makes you think they are walking straight into the next book. How I saw it is be [Kibuishi] is just basically shouting at you to read the next book (even if he hadn’t made it yet). Another page that breaks the fourth wall is page 78 (Silus’s house).

Student questionnaire data
As described above, the third item on the first questionnaire asked the students to generate comments that could be conveyed to individuals who might not appreciate the knowledge that is required to read and understand graphic novels. The purpose of this question was to elicit information about the students’ level of understanding with respect to the complexity and sophistication of creating and reading graphic novels.

The six student examples below are representative of the data that were read and reread in order to generate categories that reflected patterns evident in the students’ answers. Analysis of the data revealed that 11 students thought it necessary to communicate to others that knowledge of graphic novel compositional conventions and art elements are fundamental in order to read and understand the meaning that is conveyed by the semiotic resources of image and word. The other main category that emerged from the analysis of the students’ answers was the importance of looking deeply and carefully at graphic novels. Eleven students communicated that a superficial look at graphic novels is inadequate to ‘really’ understand and appreciate the books. The importance of looking carefully connects with the students’ opinions about readers benefiting from knowledge about art elements and graphic novel compositional conventions and codes. Related to the former two categories was the explicit recognition by six students that graphic novels
demand a high level of creativity and that these texts are works of art. Seven complete student answers follow:

**Keira**: I would tell them that they should look at the ways the author created intensity in the illustrations and to look at the colours used and also what the line does to show movement or emotion.

**Blake**: I would tell them to put yourself in the author’s shoes and imagine styling panels, sketching out, checking, lining, erasing, colouring and inking all of the pages and panels, not to mention making up expression, visual characters and a story, and if they are still stubborn, send them to a class with Dr. Pantaleo.

**Angus**: There’s more than meets the eyes. There’s frames, panels, [and] gutters that other books don’t have that shows so much more detail and meaning.

**Morgan**: I would say, ‘You may be able to read it, but can you fully understand all the concepts? Have you ever looked at how much intensity and depth are in these books? Maybe there isn’t a lot of writing but you need to do a lot of thinking. What if you had just finished writing a graphic novel, and somebody came up to you and said that was a waste of time. How would you feel?’

**Layla**: In graphic novels there is lots of knowledge that is required to understand them like intertextuality, pastiche, parodies, and lots of things that are in famous art and novels. Reading graphic novels helps to open your third eye or [give] a new perspective on literature and art.

**Trinity**: I would say, “You should look deeper into the pages and artwork because there’s more details than you think in every page.”

**Discussion**
The students’ written responses to *Amulet*, as well as their comments to hypothetical individuals who might not appreciate the knowledge that is required to read graphic novels, convey information about the students’ understanding of and appreciation for the crafting and composing of graphic novels. Schwarz (2006) wrote that, ‘to read and interpret graphic novels, students have to pay attention to the usual literary elements of characters, plot and dialogue, and they also have to consider visual elements such as color, shading, panel layout, perspective, and even the lettering style’ (p. 590). Instruction about the art elements, albeit brief during the research in the Grade 7 classrooms, served to develop student awareness of and understanding about the complexity of creating and viewing images. Although some of the students’ comments about the various art elements were more descriptive than interpretive in nature, ‘noticing’ features and expressing interest in artwork are
important behaviours and dispositions along the developmental continuum of aesthetic appreciation and awareness (Fairchild 1991; Parsons 1987).

Understanding the architecture of graphic novels requires appreciation of a designer’s use of semiotic resources and agency in the meaning-making process. Analysis of the students’ written responses and their answers to the third questionnaire item indicated that the instruction about layout features, organisational formats and conventions of graphic novels had impacted the students’ awareness of and knowledge about the structural design of graphic novels. The students conveyed their understanding that knowledge of graphic novel compositional conventions and art elements is fundamental to a reader’s aesthetic appreciation, construction of meaning, and interpretation of image and word. As is evident by the excerpts from the students’ responses and their questionnaire answers, they competently used the metalanguage they were taught to describe various compositional conventions of graphic novels. Further, like those participants in Seyfried’s (2008) research, the Grade 7 students communicated their understanding of the value and importance of looking carefully at the mode of image.

Conclusions
During the research, the focus picturebooks and graphic novels were used for several purposes including aesthetic appreciation, critical engagement and the ‘explicit teaching of how [various semiotic resources of] modes construct meaning’ (Jewitt 2008: 262). The students participated in lessons that demonstrated the value and importance of looking carefully at the mode of image, and of considering the significance of various affordances of this semiotic resource. Throughout the research the students’ experiences with the picturebooks and graphic novels communicated how ‘it is essential to see, not merely to look’ (Macaulay 1991: 419). By teaching the students about various art elements and graphic novel compositional conventions and features, we wanted to develop the students’ knowledge-base and aesthetic appreciation so that they could engage in more informed and critical readings of the multimodal texts.

Overall, the data showed that the students understood and appreciated the complexity of graphic novels as a format of literature. However, as is evident by the description of the study, the students were also learning about metafictive devices in literature and this pedagogical focus consumed a significant amount of time. Providing additional instruction about the art elements over an extended period of time would have allowed more exposure to each concept through various visual media and through concrete opportunities for the students to work with the concepts. With respect to the graphic novels, the students would have benefited from reading and discussing additional graphic novels, focusing on both general features and specific aspects, engaging in more close analysis of particular pages, and comparing the use of conventions and art elements across texts with variations in style.
Indeed, the different affordances of the modes of writing and image can be orchestrated and ensembled in multiple ways in graphic novels. Overall, additional pedagogy about graphic novel conventions and art elements would have provided the students with opportunities to deepen their understanding of how the synergy of multiple semiotic resources in graphic novels engages the brain in a rigorous workout. As Lyga (2006) wrote, readers take in ‘print and art through a series of panels, word balloons, and captions’ while being ‘bombarded simultaneously with the graphic novel’s characters, setting, plot, and action (p. 58).

The explicit teaching of how to construct meaning using various modal resources of images could be framed by encouraging students to assume the point of view of an illustrator and/or graphic novel artist and designer. Opportunities to compose and create their own graphic novels can help students understand the processes involved in creating sequential art. Carter (2009) wrote, ‘by acknowledging that there is a process behind the production of comics [and graphic novels] and asking students to consider the process and even engage in it, teachers help students build crafting, composing, viewing, and visualising skills’ (p. 71). Although at the end of the research nine of the multimodal books created by the students were graphic novel-like in nature, I believe it would have been worthwhile for the students to complete smaller assignments that required them to practise the various conventions and features they were learning about as the study progressed.

As stated previously, the multimodality of picturebooks and graphic novels makes them ideal material to work with to develop young people’s visual literacy knowledge and abilities. Learning about graphic novel conventions and art elements, and understanding and appreciating the complexity of reading and creating graphic novels, can help students when they navigate other multimodal print and digital texts. ‘By teaching students to become conscious and critical of the ways in which they make meaning from multimodal texts such as comics [and graphic novels], we can also teach students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts’ (Jacobs 2007: 24). Indeed, outside of school students are immersed in a plurality of multimodal texts that feature sophisticated structures, designs and visual representations, as well as multiple reading, writing and viewing pathways (Kress 2003). Thus, there are numerous possibilities for application and transfer of learning.

Rudiger (2006) notes that teachers must develop their own understanding about how to read graphic novels because knowing how to read sequential art is connected with valuing, promoting and teaching graphic novels as a format of literature. There is much for students to learn about graphic novels as a format and these multimodal texts should be appreciated and studied as a medium that has its own vocabulary, conventions, codes and principles. Further research exploring the use of graphic novels in classrooms could explore questions related to teacher selection, pedagogy and assessment of
these multimodal texts. Other topics worthy of further research include student comprehension, interpretation and creation of both print and digital graphic novels.

Note

1 Picturebook is spelled as a compound word to communicate the synergistic relationship between text and images in this format of book as well as to reflect its ‘totality’ as an art object.

Literature References


References


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