

Comics in Education: Research

Compiled by Tracy Edmunds, M.A. Ed.
www.tracyedmunds.com

Many teachers would like to use graphic texts in their classrooms, but need to convince their administrators of the value these complex texts can provide in instruction and learning. This document is a summary of the latest research and rationale supporting the use of comics in education.

Comics Are Motivating

“...those who read more comic books did more pleasure reading, liked to read more, and tended to read more books. These results show that comic book reading certainly does not inhibit other kinds of reading, and is consistent with the hypothesis that comic book reading facilitates heavier reading.”

— Krashen, Stephen D., and Ujii, Joanne. “Comic Book Reading, Reading Enjoyment, and Pleasure Reading Among Middle Class and Chapter (Title) 1 Middle School Students.” 1996.
<http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/comicbook>

“Taken all together, our results suggest that, with regard to student learning, comic book stories lose nothing to traditional textbooks while having the added potential benefit of improving attitudes about biology.”

—Hosler, Jay and Boomer, K. B. “Are Comic Books an Effective Way to Engage Nonmajors in Learning and Appreciating Science?” 2011. <http://www.lifescied.org/content/10/3/309.full.pdf>

Words and Pictures Together Increase Recall and Problem Solving

“...the low-level students receiving the high-level text with the comic strip scored significantly higher than their counterparts receiving the high-level text only.”

—Jun Liu. “Effect of Comic Strips on L2 Learners’ Reading Comprehension.” TESOL Quarterly, 2004.
http://sfl.ieu.edu.tr/tdu/TESOL_Quarterly_Reading.pdf

“Across the eleven studies, people who learned from words and graphics produced between 55 percent to 121 percent more correct solutions to transfer problems than people who learned from words alone. Across all studies, a median percentage gain of 89 percent was achieved with a median effect size of 1.50.”

—Mayer, Richard E. and Clark, Ruth Colvin. *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. Pfeiffer, 2011.

“Results of Study 2 find that verbatim recognition was superior with graphic novel texts compared to traditional textbooks.”

—McKenny, Aaron, Short, Jeremy, & Randolph-Seng, Brandon. Abstract: “Graphic presentation: an empirical examination of the graphic novel approach to communicate business concepts.”
http://www.academia.edu/2210806/Graphic_presentation_an_empirical_examination_of_the_graphic_novel_approach_to_communicate_business_concepts

“Results document children’s deliberate use of images and point to the important role of images in text processing.”

—Arya, Poonam & M. Feathers, Karen. (2015). “Exploring Young Children’s Use of Illustrations in a Picturebook.” *Language and Literacy*. 17. 42-62. 10.20360/G2630C.

Comics Aid Comprehension

“A graphic adaptation of a traditionally taught text (Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado”) was explored as (a) a replacement text and (b) a supplemental text. The study design utilized a factorial analysis of variance with three independent variables: text type, grade level, and gender. A reading comprehension test was developed to serve as the dependent variable. Findings indicated significant effects for all factors.”

—Cook, M.P. (in press). Now I “see”: Graphic novels promoting reading comprehension in high school English classrooms. *Literacy Research & Instruction*. 10.1080/19388071.2016.1244869

“...24 mixed-ability fifth grade students chose to read six novels: two traditional novels, two highly illustrated novels and two graphic novels. ...In this study, reading of graphic novels stimulated more student discussion using the structure of thinking skills and greater story comprehension. ... The mean number of student responses to the de Bono thinking skill prompts initiated by students was higher for the graphic novels than for either of the other two novel forms. ...Graphic novels also increased student comprehension as measured by the midterm assessment writing prompts and final project scores. ...Student midterm assessment responses for graphic novels showed higher assessment scores than either of the other two novel forms. ...The survey results showed that the students reading graphic novels reported greater enjoyment of reading and stronger interest in the story than when reading either of the other two novel forms.

—Jennings, K. A., Rule, A. C., & Zanden, S. M. V. (2014). “Fifth Graders’ Enjoyment, Interest, and Comprehension of Graphic Novels Compared to Heavily-Illustrated and Traditional Novels.” *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 6(2), 257–274.

https://scholarworks.uni.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1013&context=ci_facpub

“...a diverse group of second grade students during a nine week unit of study focused on graphic stories. ...Images, written text, and dialog are utilized to scaffold reading comprehension and to practice fluency. Then, students construct their own graphic stories based on characters from books, popular culture, and personal experiences. ...The results indicate student growth in the areas of comprehension and fluency.”

—Brown, S. (2013). “A Blended Approach to Reading and Writing Graphic Stories.” *The Reading Teacher*, 67(3), 208–219. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.1211>

Comics Have a High Average Vocabulary Level

Comic books average 53.5 rare words per thousand, while children’s books average 30.9, adult books average 52.7, expert witness testimony averages 28.4, and the conversations of college graduates with friends average 17.3.

—“Big Ideas in Beginning Reading: Vocabulary.” University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning. http://reading.uoregon.edu/big_ideas/voc/voc_what.php

Comics Enrich the Skills of Accomplished Readers

“More than a gateway to literacy, the spatial interplay of visual and verbal that defines comics makes for a powerful tool for inquiry primed for creative and critical practice.”

—Sousanis, Nick, “Comics as a Tool for Inquiry (Concerning a Dissertation in Comic Book Form).” Columbia University, Teachers College, 2012. http://www.juniata.edu/services/jcpress/voices/pdf/2012/jv_2012_162-172.pdf

"Data analysis revealed the Grade 7 students' high level thinking about and aesthetic appreciation of the visual elements of art and design and graphic novel conventions that were under study."

—Pantaleo, Sylvia. "Reading Images in Graphic Novels: Taking Students to a "Greater Thinking Level" English in Australia, v49 n1 p38-51 2014. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1031456>

"Incorporating visual rhetoric into your curriculum will also require students to practice higher learning critical thinking and analytical skills emphasized in an AP curriculum. The reading of both visuals and text together usually necessitates inference skills and a synthesis of a number of clues presented both on the page and as a pattern throughout the book. Graphic novels allow for a new approach to diction, imagery, syntax, structure, and language. ...Graphic novels also substitute figurative imagery with the images themselves, but the interplay of what is written and what is drawn makes for an important point of analysis. Often graphic novelists exploit the dual expressions of text and visuals to create puns, irony, and paradox. Syntax also becomes an examination of both sentence structure and panel and object structure."

—Cohen, Lisa. "But This Book Has Pictures! The Case for Graphic Novels in an AP Classroom." http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/158535.html

Comics Support Beginning and Struggling Readers

"With graphic novels, the scaffolding necessary to build solid readers is in the architecture of the genre. The illustrations not only support the text, they are a part of the text. Students are given context clues within the subtle and sometime not so subtle expressions, symbols and actions of the characters with in the story. Vocabulary is also supported within the illustrations and text."

—Pennella, Brenda. "Graphic Novels: The POW!-er in the classroom!" Brodart: Graphic Novels.

"With comics and graphic novels, beginning readers can enjoy more emotion, action, and detail than in a typical 'See Jane run' story. When kids read enjoyable, complex, compelling stories they are motivated to read more, so graphic novels can be a great stepping-stone to longer text works. This is also an advantage when encouraging struggling or reluctant readers or English learners—they can enjoy great stories and practice high-level reading comprehension skills even at a lower text reading level."

—Edmunds, Tracy. "Why Should Kids Read Comics?" <http://www.tracyedmunds.com/home/why-should-kids-read-comics>

Comics Support English Language Learners

"The students, primarily English-language learners, were able to make use of this medium [comics] in order to learn new reading practices. The teacher used the comics to teach multiple aspects of various reading processes...[this] demonstrates their use as instructional texts, because comics provide interesting and motivating material as well as visual support for literacy learning."

—Ranker, Jason. Abstract: "Using Comics as Read-Alouds: Insights on Reading Instruction from an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Classroom." *The Reading Teacher*, October 2007. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1598/RT.61.4.2/abstract>

Tracy Edmunds, M.A. Ed.

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