Adolescents and “Autographics”: Reading and Writing Coming-of-Age Graphic Novels

Reading and writing graphic novels can be motivating for struggling students and reluctant readers, and can also support development of the multimodal literacy skills needed for school and workplace success in the 21st century

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On the first day of a project that explored reading and writing coming-of-age novels, a grade 11 student in a workplace preparation English class declared openly (and somewhat proudly) that he had “never finished a novel in [his] life.” By the end of the project, he had not only read a graphic novel but also created an eight-panel graphic narrative of his own.

In this article, we examine how literacy skills develop and how image, text, and sound (in text) converge to make meaning for adolescents when reading and writing/creating multimodal sequential art panels in the style of graphic novels.

Two Case Study Programs

In this project, we worked with total of 12 adolescents, ages 15 to 17, in two different programs at separate locations. Using video, photo, and other material artifacts from classroom sessions; semistructured interviews with selected students; and field journals, we conducted an in–depth qualitative analysis of the classroom-based learning.

Our first case study focused on six male students in a grade 11 workplace preparation English class at a secondary school east of Toronto, Canada. These students spent approximately six weeks of class time reading two coming-of-age graphic novels—Rabagliati’s Paul Has a Summer Job and Tamaki and Tamaki’s Skim—and creating a series of their own sequential art panels.

The second case involved six different students, males and females, in a multigrade alternative program—an academic psychosocial program for expelled students—at a facility east of Toronto. Over six weeks, these students worked on a media arts unit that began with a focus on visual literacy and included reading a variety of graphic novels. Their unit culminated in the creation of sequential art panels that told the story of a turning point in their lives or the event that landed them in the alternative program.

The students in both case studies generally perceive themselves as not good at reading or writing, that they do not like to read and are reluctant to