

Chapter 1

Historical Thinking and Reasoning in a Graphic Novel: Opportunities for Practice in *The Harlem Hellfighters*

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors demonstrate how teachers can use graphic novels in classroom spaces to support student learning and literacy outcomes while simultaneously valuing unique meaning making potential of graphic novels. Specifically, the authors address ways in which graphic novels can be used to promote history and social studies learning while capitalizing on graphic novels' complex, sophisticated, and multimodal nature. They suggest that rather than using graphic novels to trick kids into liking reading and learning content, graphic novels can be leveraged to promote deep, critical thinking about history and social studies. To accomplish this, the authors propose combining the opportunities for practice framework with a social semiotic view of multimodality as a means of supporting students' reading of historical fiction and non-fiction graphic novels.

INTRODUCTION

In her capacity as a comics scholar and teacher educator, Author1 often hears comments from teachers, librarians, and parents expressing their surprise at how popular graphic novels appear to be with children and adolescents. These individuals will reflect on how graphic novels will fly off the shelves in classroom, school, and public libraries. Others will express bafflement over children and adolescents' seemingly voracious appetites for graphic novels while lamenting the apparent lack of interest in traditional books.

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While anecdotal, these comments reflect what children's and young adult publishers have known for some time—graphic novels are wildly popular reading material with kids of all ages (Riesman, 2017).

According to Riesman (2017), this popularity is so widespread that it has resulted in a publishing boom of graphic novels that some in the industry refer to as a “Youth-Comics Explosion” (para. 8) and a “graphic novel renaissance” (para. 10). In both 2020 and 2021, graphic novel sales saw massive increases at 100% and 65% growth respectively (Grunenwald & MacDonald, 2022). While these increases include adult graphic novel sales, 2021 saw 24% growth in kids fiction graphic novels, 30% growth in young adult nonfiction graphic novels, and 96% in young adult fiction graphic novels sales (Grunenwald & MacDonald, 2022).

With popularity comes potential. Education researchers have long noted that student engagement and interest can result in positive learning outcomes (e.g., Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Dewey, 1938/1997; Gee, 2017). Thus, proponents of graphic novels often make the case for using graphic novels in educational contexts by pointing to the medium's ability to motivate, engage, and interest readers (Hutchinson, 1949; Jennings et al., 2014; Millard & Marsh, 2001; Sones, 1944). Others suggest that graphic novels can be used as a scaffold for launching students from being reluctant readers to successful readers of traditional texts (Gorman, 2008). Still others advocate for the use of graphic novels in content area classrooms such as science and social studies as a way to essentially trick students into learning content area material (Cromer & Clark, 2007; Jennings et al., 2014).

But, as Jiménez et al. (2017) point out, “graphic novels are more than simply a means to end” (p. 363). Positioning graphic novels solely as a tool for supporting traditional literacy and learning goals denigrates the medium by placing it in a subservient or supporting role in classroom spaces. Rather, it is important that educators recognize the medium's sophistication and complexity born of its multimodal nature (Author1, 2018). Multimodal texts—ensembles that rely on more than one mode (e.g., written text, image, or sound) to convey information—require readers to read differently or in unique ways than is required by traditional, logocentric texts (Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006) thus providing readers with “multiple access points...to read and think critically about literature, history, and culture” (Jiménez et al., 2017, p. 363).

In this chapter, the authors demonstrate how teachers can use graphic novels in classroom spaces to support student learning and literacy outcomes while simultaneously valuing the medium's unique meaning making potential. Specifically, they address ways in which graphic novels can be used to promote history and social studies learning while capitalizing on their complex, sophisticated, and multimodal nature. They suggest that rather than using graphic novels to trick kids into liking reading and learning content, graphic novels can be leveraged to promote deep, critical thinking about history and social studies. To accomplish this, the authors propose combining the Opportunities for Practice Framework with a social semiotic view of multimodality as a means of supporting students' reading of historical fiction and non-fiction graphic novels to facilitate learners' legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in one or more of the Discourses associated with the social studies field.

The chapter begins with a conceptualization of comics and graphic novels. Then, the authors review empirical research related to comics and graphic novels in educational contexts and content area classrooms with specific attention paid to the subject of social studies. They follow this with a discussion of the Opportunities for Practice Framework and a social semiotic view of multimodal which are the perspectives that frame this inquiry. Then, the researchers illustrate the use of this framework through a worked example (Barab et al., 2009; Gee, 2009) using the graphic novel, *Harlem Hellfighters* (Brooks,

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