

-INTRODUCTION-

REDEFINING THE TEACHING OF READING

Sister: Alice! Will you kindly pay attention to your history lesson?

Alice: I'm sorry, but how can one possibly pay attention to a book with no pictures in it?

Sister: My dear child, there are a great many good books in this world without pictures.

Alice: In this world perhaps. But in my world, the books would be nothing but pictures.

- Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* -

In fourth grade, my teacher's name was Mrs. Savage, an early indication that something wasn't quite right.

Here's the second indication:

"In fourth grade," Mrs. Savage explained, "we DO NOT read kiddie books. No more books with pictures. Time for real reading, ladies and gentlemen!"

In my mind, this translated into two things I could check off my mental list of questions to ask Mrs. Savage:

1. *No need to ask about crayons and markers. If we can't read pictures, we certainly aren't going to be asked to draw or illustrate them.*
2. *No need to ask about recess either. I was pretty certain that while we would want two, like in third grade, Mrs. Savage had probably already decided upon one.*

Mrs. Savage's introduction to fourth grade, while frightening, was also exciting. I had secretly been wishing, as all kids do at some point, that I would be and could be counted as an adult. At the time, I was pretty sure that reading books without pictures and only attending one recess a day meant that I was an adult.

On my revised agenda for that first day of school, I now added: *Inform little brother of new status.*

I got my opportunity at the end of the day on the bus ride home. "Hey, just so you know, I am an adult now, and you are still a baby. I will no longer play with you. Adults don't play with babies."

After I really grew up—which is probably more accurately identified as during my college years rather than in fourth grade—I realized that Mrs. Savage was wrong about reading. And she was certainly wrong about recess.

A READING REVOLUTION: SETTING THE STAGE FOR PRINT-TEXT LITERACIES TO SHARE THE STAGE WITH IMAGE LITERACIES

As an adult reading educator, I have made a career out of being what I call "a scholarly Peter Pan." I still read books with pictures, most of which are graphic novels. And I even travel around to talk to teachers about the contemporary value behind why and how we should intensify our efforts to do so.

So, why do I think it's necessary for teachers to make a shift toward a more visually-based ELA instructional approach?

A shift in ELA pedagogy is necessary because we are living during what many literacy educators see as the greatest communication revolution of all time. In *Literacy in the New Media Age*, Kress (2003) claims that, "The world told is a different world to the world shown" (p. 1). Try to envision a newly built stage with two actors upon it. One character is named Print-text Literacy, and the other is named Image Literacy. On this new-media-age stage, Print-text Literacy and Image Literacy are co-stars. They share the spotlight.

Driven in the last twenty years by a communication revolution second only to the fifteenth-century invention of the printing press, today's ELA teachers are the first generation of educators to redefine the teaching of reading. Today's students live in a new media age, a world where it is critical to be able to read words and images together. Thus, today's reading teacher must teach a shared literacy stage that places emphasis on screen and/or image

literacies—computers, televisions, smartphones, email, vmail, videogames, online magazines, the Internet, graphic novels, and comics—alongside print-text literacies. Perhaps Will Eisner (1985), one of the founding fathers of the graphic novel, said it best:

The format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art (eg., perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (eg., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of the comic book is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit. (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 8)

Early reader comics and graphic novels present readers with a rare and modern, literary-level text that uses print-text literacies and image literacies simultaneously. They are invariably independent and dependent upon each other, each one taking center stage at times and then sharing the stage at other times, working in unison to communicate modern, literary stories.

Image literacies such as comics and graphic novels ask us to rethink how we define reading and writing today. The bottom line is that each of these new literacy reading experiences call on us to be competent readers of both words and images; whether looking at a screen or a comic or a graphic novel page, readers must be taught to read images and words together. It's the reality of the world we currently live in.

Eisner (1985) further explains how this new, shared literacy stage has become its own language worthy of classroom attention: "They [comics] become a language—a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art" (*Comics and Sequential Art*, p. 8). When we place Eisner's idea that comics and graphic novels are a language worthy of classroom attention within the arguably greatest communication revolution of all time, it becomes abundantly and critically clear that today's educators need to teach this new literary language in their classrooms.

This seismic and exciting shift in ELA pedagogy is revolutionary. Adding image literacies as an equal partner with print-text literacies in ELA classrooms has not only never been attempted, but it has also never been so critically necessary. If we fail to teach print-text literacies alongside image literacies, modern literacy scholars fear that we might commit the greatest disservice in the history of education. Because the literacy world outside of school has so clearly moved on to incorporate print-text literacies alongside image literacies, a failure to adopt a pedagogy of multiliteracies will only create a further gap between what kinds of literacies students interact with at home or at work and those they interact with at school. In our modern era, we cannot afford to gamble on whether or not print-text literacies will ultimately stand the test of time. They won't. Outside of the classroom, the world is already immersed in reading print-text literacies alongside image literacies (Abel & Madden, 2008; Bitz, 2009, 2010; Hadju, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Kist, 2004, 2010; Masterman, 1985; McCloud, 1993, 2000, 2006; McLuhan, 1964).

Remember: While our current communication revolution is second chronologically, it is first in terms of significance! By shifting our pedagogy away from a solo focus on teaching print-text literacies alone and toward a dual, shared focus on teaching print-text and image literacies together, we are the first generation of teachers to redefine what it means to read. Each and every semester, my pre-service and in-service teachers state that they find this critical time in the history of teaching ELA empowering. In the fall of 2009, an undergraduate student wrote, “I wanted to be a teacher so I could make a difference. Now I get to be part of the most difference ever. It’s exciting!” A graduate student sent an email after class was over, which stated: “The class made me look at everything more seriously. I see now how print text and visual text are everywhere, both together and separate. Our lives are full of images and words. It’s like I put on a new set of glasses that allowed me to see anew.”

Theoretically, the New London Group (1996) sees this opportunity for today’s ELA educators as a chance to adopt “a pedagogy of multiliteracies”:

What we term ‘mere literacy’ remains centered on language only....A pedagogy of multiliteracies by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone...the visual mode of representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than ‘mere literacy’ would ever be able to allow. (p. 64)

Due to their equal reliance on print-text and image literacies, early reader comics and graphic novels are two modern literacy formats that easily lend themselves to the adoption of a pedagogy of multiliteracies.

The conventions and styles used in early reader comics and graphic novels (panels, gutters, word balloons, and so on) have actually been evident and well received in children’s literature for quite a while. For instance, Maurice Sendak has often been considered an early pioneer of using comic-like panels and gutters in children’s literature, especially in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and *In the Night Kitchen* (1970). Even Charles Schulz (creator of *Peanuts*) and Jim Davis (creator of *Garfield*) have enjoyed well-secured places in children’s literature when, in reality, their work is much more comic-like than not.

In fact, early reader comics and graphic novels are currently registering on my personal radar as the most exciting area of new literacy growth. For instance, acclaimed graphic novel and comic book visionaries and entrepreneurs Art Spiegelman (Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novelist of *Maus*) and Françoise Mouly (Art Editor at *The New Yorker*) have started an early reader, classroom-friendly comic book publishing company called Toon Books. The major publishing companies are even starting to support this shift: Scholastic, First Second Books, Image, and legendary “big dogs” DC and Marvel have all started publishing early reader comics and graphic novels. Large bookstore chains such as Barnes & Noble, Borders, and Books-A-Million now have entire sections of their children’s literature departments devoted to early reader comic books and graphic novels.

It's an exciting time to teach literacy to early readers indeed! The goal of *Teaching Early Reader Comics and Graphic Novels* is to give teachers the ready-to-use, practitioner-friendly tools they need to embrace multiliteracies and teach the language of comics and graphic novels in their early reader classrooms.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This book is organized into two main sections. In the first section, Chapter 1 presents teachers with the theory and terminology for teaching early reader comics and graphic novels in their classrooms. Chapters 2 through 4 comprise the second section and offer a variety of classroom-friendly ideas for teaching early reader comics and graphic novels to emerging and striving readers (Chapter 2), to advanced readers (Chapter 3), and, finally, for multicultural responsibility (Chapter 4). Each chapter features:

- Grade-level- and age-appropriate comic and graphic novel grab bags: Suggested comics and graphic novels for kindergarten through sixth grade;
- Alignment to the IRA (International Reading Association) and NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) standards;
- Reading- and writing-focused lesson plans for teaching early reader comics and/or graphic novels;
- A teacher resources section that focuses on a specific early reader comic or graphic novel, its author(s) and illustrator(s), and teaching strategies;
- Classroom-friendly, ready-to-copy blank lesson plans, which can also be downloaded at <http://teachinggraphicnovels.blogspot.com>.

With hats off and a humble bow to the comic and graphic novel scholars and teachers who have come before me, I offer *Teaching Early Reader Comics and Graphic Novels*.