Graphic Novels about Social Justice in Pedagogy

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Introduction

Communication scholars (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short, & Reeves, 2009; Williams & Peterson, 2009) have examined graphic novels as a medium of communicative expression through visual literacy. Scholars have commonly focused on graphic novels in the context of secondary education, (Bucher & Manning, 2004), business concepts (Schultz, 2006; Weiner, 2011) and interpersonal communication (Meyers, 2014). However, few researchers (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Connors, 2012) have examined how teachers use graphic novels to teach effectively. Two communication scholars (Bucher & Manning, 2004) have examined the utilization of graphic novels in the classroom. A small number of researchers have researched about how professors can use graphic novels to explain the importance of social justice.

Pedagogy can occur in technical and visualized writing (Portewig, 2004). When students confront the idea of social justice, students attempt to empathize the issues (new or old) that challenge different paradigms. Blummer (2015) defined visual literacy as a skill that people use to decipher an image’s meaning, and has shown evidence through analytical studies that visual literate people can efficiently understand the context of the material rather than to read a literary text. Researchers (Short & Reeves, 2009) have defined graphic novels as illustrated works, originally for the mature demographic, that artists make to depict vivid plot of the story. Researchers have used different methods such as surveys in secondary education/business collegiate classes, and literary analysis of several graphic novels in order to analyze the use of graphic novels in a pedagogical context (Blummer, 2015; Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short, & Reeves, 2009; and Weiner, 2011). People popularize graphic novels, but do not regard graphic novels as academic material. Downey (2009) stated an increasing amount of students surrounded
by media everyday can benefit from graphic novels to engage more in class and develop visual literacy, as well as engage different issues within social justice.

Although scholars have considered text-only documents as proficient and concise, readers view documents less inviting when readers compare documents to their visualized counterpart. Researchers (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short, J. C., Randolph-Seng, B., & McKenny, A. F., 2013) have explored the potential of academic graphic novels and the difference from traditional textbooks. The researchers have argued that people can achieve effective communication through storytelling narratives and graphic novels in the educational context (Downey, E. M., 2009; Bucher, K. T., & Manning, M. L., 2004; Short, J. C., Randolph-Seng, B., & McKenny, A. F., 2013).

However, communication scholars have scarce research for pedagogical use of graphic novels teaching social justice, specifically how superheroes or characters portray themes of social injustice. Shugart (2009) stated the reflection of pop culture and social outcasts through superheroes. McGrath (2007) explored the misrepresentations and disfigurations of gender, race, and Latina identity in comic books. While graphic novels do contain mature elements, authors present controversial topics and challenging themes (e.g., racism, immigration, and other hot topics), which students can discuss certain topics through the perspective of the character(s). Bucher and Manning (2004) have encouraged the use of graphic novels in classrooms, despite some objections from different educators, for students’ interdisciplinary knowledge and quality discussion.

**Literature Review**

Professors and teachers search for different ways to engage students’ interest and retention of subject material. Within the past decade, professors have used graphic novels as an
alternative medium to approach lessons (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Schultz, 2006; Meyers, 2014). Scholars have researched professors and teachers who successfully utilized graphic novels to instruct different subjects in academia. However, I would like to expand upon this research by including the possibility of professors instructing social justice to students through the use of graphic novels. I will review literature pertaining to pedagogy, social justice, graphic novels, and visual literacy.

**Critical Pedagogy in Universities**

Cooks (2010) defined “communication” as a basic transaction of symbols and messages, how people view messages as apparent, and the origins of messages. Students who have received critical activism pedagogy (CAP) constantly question dominant ideologies and systems. Simpson (2014) listed the three components in critical pedagogy: (1) analyzing knowledge and power, (2) the need for democratic imagination, and (3) learning as a gateway for social change. Simpson (2014) stated that liberalized critical pedagogues emphasize representative or cultural issues rather than materialistic ones. Superiors often pressure critical communication pedagogues to focus on the course content rather than adding more discourse about social conditions (Simpson, 2014).

Simpson (2014) stated that professors and students require a minimum of five components to fully understand CAP: (1) understanding communication, (2) the connection between knowledge and institutional power, (3) thoughtfulness of peoples’ way of life, (4) interconnection of society and the actions that affect society, (5) a desire for initiating a good cause. Simpson (2014) said that instructors and students with race privilege have inadequate information, empathy, and experience(s) of racial oppression, the effects of oppression, and how people counter oppression. Together, instructors and students must explore issues outside of their
daily lives (Simpson, 2014). Simpson (2014) provided an example of a CAP course where students attempt to convince government representatives to answer for the injustices in their local community. In order to strategize and utilize activist speech, instructors and students must reeducate their ideologies with the realities of oppressed social groups and understand the institutions that oppress minorities (Simpson, 2014). Critical pedagogues obtain accomplishment when teachers see students engaged and willing to approach difficult questions in social inequality (Simpson 2014).

Communication professors use critical pedagogy to challenge students’ paradigms so that the students think about the worth of communication, and which groups of people (socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural) have permission to discuss sensitive topics such as immigration, abortion, and other human rights (Warren & Fassett, 2010). Professors teach critical communication pedagogy in order to increase the audiences’ thoughtfulness on social justice issues (Warren & Fassett, 2010). Warren and Fassett (2010) have stated that scholars interconnect critical pedagogy and social justice, as well as how people can express democratic dialogue and engage in creating change through the reviewing of communication.

Students have access to textbooks which students acquire and apprehend the history of critical pedagogy. McGarrity (2010) concluded that textbook authors view older textbooks as a recorded library of past pedagogical activities. Students encounter relevant textbooks of modern society and topics on social justice.

**Understanding Social Justice**

Rodriguez (2006) explored the importance of community, how communities perceive theories, cultures, and politics differently through course readings. Rodriguez (2006) defined social justice as a committed action to defend the undervalued people groups and the peoples’
rights from groups that detriment them. Rodriguez (2006) questioned what purpose social justice serves for neglected yet broader and diverse social groups. Rodriguez (2006) questioned if homogeneity has a place for social culturalism; For example, Rodriguez attested that people speaking a unified language would reduce the obstruction of communication (thus allowing smoother communication), but people speaking one language would force different cultures to transition to one culture. Rodriguez (2006) challenged students to think about how a homogenous culture can survive, but people would create beliefs of hostility and partiality against other cultures through mass unification. Rodriguez (2006) stated that people have the ability to understand realities outside from personal experiences only if people allow self-subjection to new or different humanistic cultures. Rodriguez (2006) asked the audiences to examine the mindsets from different worldviews and discourse in order for humans to explore and approbate other peoples’ worldviews. People who use effective communication can accelerate the progression of society and enable inclusivity to lesser known ideas and thoughts (Rodriguez, 2006).

Crumley (2006) listed three components that structure social justice: Interpersonal communication, the social engagement, and communication with the less fortunate. “The concepts of respect, equity, and fairness are foundational to a sense of justice” (Crumley, 2006, p.176). However, many people presume that people will accumulate relational skills as people mature, which can deteriorate a person's relationship with others (Crumley, 2006). Crumley (2006) suggested that strong heterogeneity exists because of the variance in age, gender, biological, intellectual, emotional, socioeconomic, and cultural factors in the world. Crumley (2006) argued that the value of relationships and social justice co-exist with each other, and that through peoples’ investments in good relationships, people can permeate social support in
Crumley (2006) advocated that interpersonal scholars should review the impact of language within relationships and meanings. People who subject themselves to stereotyping and scripted dialogue when interacting with individuals’ different values and cultures place a blindfold over their own perspectives (Crumley, 2006). Once people establish respect and communication, people will consider a just and favorable way of creating dialogue for social justice in all parts of society (Crumley, 2006). Crumley (2006) questioned both how and who decides the boundaries and trespasses of social justice. People receive influence from their significant others or peers’ perception of justice and injustice (Crumley, 2006). People who have advantages from social injustice fail to perceive the disadvantages that other people face (Crumley, 2006). Humans changed the meaning of social justice as time progressed along with the transformation of society (Crumley, 2006). Crumley (2006) stated that solo or small group researchers who address different issues have unreasonable research because of the scholars’ limited perspectives. Crumley (2006) expounded the necessity for students to learn interpersonal communication to construct uplifting discourse amongst their peers. Crumley (2006) suggested that mediums such as novels, short stories, or theatre could educate students on relational communication.

As students of diverse backgrounds gradually enroll into schools, the schools have responsibilities to incorporate a more inclusive and multicultural aspect into critical pedagogy (Danzak, 2011). “There have been very few research studies exploring the outcomes of using comics/graphic novels in the EL (English Learning) classroom,” (Danzak, 2011, p.189). Many Hispanic ELs, or English Learners, have stories of adversity such as little to no fluency in English, experiences of crossing the U.S. border at night, and long-term separation from family members (Danzak, 2011).
Despite cultural differences, students connect with each other through pop culture. Students can understand the perspective of a comic book character if the student participates in role playing or imaging themselves as the character (e.g., Spider-Man), and discuss each other’s decisions (Gerde & Foster, 2008). Interestingly, students from different backgrounds can collectively identify with the character. Educators need to familiarize themselves with various comic books in order to use those comic book characters as part of curriculum (Gerde & Foster, 2008).

Readers encounter different messages that the authors convey through their works. Robinson (2004) analyzed Wonder Woman’s persona, outfit, and equipment to reveal subtle meanings the authors and artists may have made. Wonder Woman harnesses super strength and bullet deflecting abilities through bracelets that Wonder Woman equips (Robinson, 2004). However, if a villain connects Wonder Woman’s bracelets after overpowering her, readers can view the action as if Wonder Woman “allowed” herself to become vulnerable (Robinson, 2004). Robinson (2004) made a comparison of Wonder Woman’s moments of defeat in which the readers may assume she “allowed shameful defeat to happen” to rape cases. Robinson (2004) also added that Comic book authors objectified Wonder Woman’s figure to exaggerate what an ideal woman’s body should look like. Robinson (2004) described Wonder Woman’s outfit (something resembling pinup/swimsuit models) and compared Wonder Woman’s physique with Superman’s and Batman’s. While Superman and Batman have well-designed muscles to define their strength, authors denied readers from seeing what makes Wonder Woman strong based on Wonder Woman’s body, which lacks the appearance of a strong fighter (Robinson, 2004).

Comic book company Marvel and its authors write different themes in their works. “The Fantastic Four had a family dynamic, the Hulk dealt with issues of rage, Spider-Man comic
books were filled with adolescent angst, and the X-Men comic books would become identified with themes of prejudice and fear” (Darowski, 2014, p. 6). In the X-Men universe, people who experience genetic changes acquire super powers through science experiments, radioactivity, mystic artifacts, or aliens (Darowski, 2014). Out of fear, humans who have not experienced mutation declare prejudice against mutants (Darowski, 2014). Despite the animosity, the X-Men joined to protect the world that antagonizes the heroes (Darowski, 2014). The comic book creators forged a meaningful metaphor of the X-Men to how society mistreats individuals that differ racially, culturally, religiously, or sexually from the majority/norm. Minorities experience alienation, even without direct prejudgment (Darowski, 2014).

Nightcrawler, a team-member of the X-Men, has an appearance that closely resembles a devilish creature with blue fur (Darowski, 2014). Although normal humans have accepted the appearance of heroes with non-human features, Nightcrawler often uses a device that transforms the user’s outer appearance to look like a normal human, showing Nightcrawler’s difficulty of accepting self-identity (Darowski, 2014).

Storm, field leader of the X-Men, lived as a goddess and received worship from indigenous Kenyans (Darowski, 2014). Storm had no knowledge of mutant powers until Professor Xavier spoke with Storm, explaining about the modern reality and setting for mutant kind, thus replacing Storm’s customary values (Darowski, 2014). Storm’s encounter with Professor Xavier strikes a strong resemblance to the narrative of a white man repurposing another person’s way of life (Darowski, 2014). One of the creators stated that Storm’s minimalistic attire (part of Storm’s cultural tradition) did not suggest hypersexualization, however Readers could objectify Storm and not acknowledge character development when the artists have drawn Storm without clothing (Darowski, 2014).
The creators of X-Men have comprised the X-Men of multiple diversely ethnic characters, which made the comic books unique (Darowski, 2014). More likely, adolescents read graphic novels and confront critical questions and paradigms of society (Darowski, 2014; Gerde & Foster, 2008). The creators of X-Men have used stereotypes to bring light into the challenges of stereotyping. Often, the creators have struggled with stabilizing cultural tradition with stereotypes as a shortcut for readers to interpret each character. The creators envisioned a set of blemished individuals who adopt each other as family (Darowski, 2014).

Comic book creators research real life issues and then transcribe social injustices into the perspective of comic book characters and the fantasy world, which readers can pinpoint while reading panels that the artists created through visual design.

**Visual Literacy Influence on Students**

Visual literacy, the reading of symbols and images that people often do on a daily basis (Baetens & Surdiacourt, 2011; Blummer, 2015; Olk & Kappas, 2011). Researchers Baetens and Surdiacourt (2011) have argued that verbal signs influence the way people view images as well as the reverse; images become words when read. Humans have to focus one area at a time due to brain function and design (Olk & Kappas, 2011). “The movements that we make with our eyes, the jumps from fixation point to fixation point, are called *saccades*”, which people do when focusing to a limited small area at a time (Olk & Kappas, 2011, p.433).

Researchers (Baetens & Surdiacourt, 2011; Blummer, 2015; Olk & Kappas, 2011) have suggested that visual literacy benefits readers to read quickly because of the fact that people can understand an image instantaneously when reading the words that follow an image. Blummer (2015) argued that students benefit from visual literacy and become influenced to better understand visual design and communication. Blummer (2015) suggested that people who use
visual literacy through different mediums such as film, photography, puppetry, and graphic novels are stimulated.

Researchers (Baetens & Surdiacourt, 2011; Blummer, 2015) have stated that readers can read images and texts together in graphic novels; readers process multilayered components like speech balloons or bubbles with text/dialogue inside, the narration, the onomatopoeic words, and the illustrations (basic shapes and viewpoints). Researchers Baetens and Surdiacourt (2011) have used the example from the opening of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, where the protagonist skates with two friends, trips and falls, exclaims “Ow!” as the two friends leave the protagonist behind. In the illustration, researchers Baetens and Surdiacourt (2011) have analyzed the scene and described how a reader would inspect each visual and verbal element.

As people read graphic novels, readers maintain an indirect relationship with the characters and often imagine the different voices through storytelling (Baetens & Surdiacourt, 2011). Researchers Baetens and Surdiacourt (2011) have stated a goal to influence individuals to consider the concept of narrative voice. Researchers Baetens and Surdiacourt (2011) have stated that readers can recognize grammatextual elements in graphic novels while reading the narratives; readers experience the world through the characters in the story, a strong influence to many readers (Baetens & Surdiacourt, 2011).

**Graphic Novels in Universities**

Researchers (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short & Reeves, 2009; Downey, 2009) have defined graphic novels as sequential illustrations with literary text that multiplies the depth and meaning of the story. The demographic of youth and young adults has a preference for graphic novels because authors and publishers create graphic novels for younger people and children, particularly students in Generation Y (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short & Reeves, 2009).
Although the academy views graphic novels of certain genres (e.g., manga, horror, sci-fi, and superheroes) as having few redeeming qualities, educators can creatively take advantage of the popularity of graphic novels by offering graphic novels as alternatives for students to engage course materials rather than traditional textbooks (Downey, 2009; Toren, 2011). Educators can use graphic novels for visual learners and students struggling to visually comprehend ideas or imagining a scene (Downey, 2009; Gillenwater, 2009).

In the business field, some professors offer graphic novels about business organization and structure (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Meyers, 2014; Short, Randolph-Seng, & McKenny, 2013). Authors Jeremy Short, Talya Bauer, Dave Ketchen, and Len Simon created the Atlas Black series, an example of a business related graphic novel combined with textbook elements (Weiner, 2011). The authors have included management principles, management communication, entrepreneurship, the historical influences from business people, mission statements, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, business modeling, and stages in professional development (Weiner, 2011). Researchers (Short & Reeves, 2009) have stated that professors can teach students of entrepreneurship by storytelling a protagonist’s desires of entrepreneurship through sequential illustration. Schultz (2006) required some visual form of communication from students in an assignment that accurately represented clientele and conveyed the message. Schultz (2006) argued that visual enhancements helped students understand messages, which resulted in more effective communication.

The academy assimilated graphic novels into school curriculum (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Downey, 2009) as well as graduate-level libraries (Downey & Davidson, 2012). According to Downey (2009), “in March 2008, Louisiana State University announced that their Summer Reading Program selection, a suggested book for incoming freshmen in addition to
other students, faculty, and staff, would choose a graphic novel” (p. 185). According to Zorbaugh (1944), “more than 2,500 classrooms, children learned to read from "Superman" workbooks” (p. 202). Some examples today include: Art Spiegelman’s *The Complete Maus* (1997), an autobiography about the author’s father’s experience in the Holocaust during the rise of Nazi Germany; Ottoviani’s *Dignifying Science* (2000), a record of famous women in science, and classic adaptations like Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (2003) by Peter Kuper (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Short & Reeves, 2009). Teachers can utilize the illustrations and text of graphic novels as a resource for students to understand classes that rely on large numbers of theories and viewpoints (socioeconomically and culturally) (Bucher & Manning, 2004; McGrath, 2007; Shugart, 2009). Students may acknowledge unheard voices of minorities and immigration concepts when students read graphic novels, such as H. F. Kiyama’s *The Four Immigrants Manga* (1999), an illustration of four Japanese immigrants in San Francisco in the early 1900’s (Bucher & Manning, 2004). However, scholars have not researched extensively on the pedagogical use of graphic novels pertaining to social justice.

In the field of social justice, scholars have worked to improve social issues like gender inequality, discrimination, and other types of inequality (Hartnett, 2010). Researchers (Blummer, 2015; Gillenwater, 2009) have argued that people can read images as a supplement for the content of a text. Professors can utilize graphic novels as a pedagogical tool to direct and visually empower students to see the diverse perspectives of various sociological cultures around the world (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Downey, 2009; McGrath, 2007).

**Research Question**

RQ1: How do college students empathize with social justice through the pedagogical use of graphic novels?
Rationale

Readers experience communication in graphic novels through visual literacy, when readers understand the text and illustrations as symbols of meaning (Blummer, 2015; Connors, 2012; Gillenwater, 2009). Through visual literacy, students can improve the retention of information, find shortcuts for textbook reading (in visualized textbooks), and experience learning through entertainment (Downey, 2009; Short & Reeves, 2009). In the context of social justice, students can read and retain information about social justice through the illustrations of graphic novels (Shugart, 2009). People understand better through visual aesthetics; visual aesthetics include: drawings/pictures, logos, colors, and font types (Schultz, 2006).

However, researchers lack information about the pedagogical communicative process of social justice within graphic novels. Scholars require more evidence in order to persuade academia to produce textbooks in the graphic novel format. I revealed the gaps about the absent research of pedagogical graphic novels in social justice in hopes to discover more areas that elaborate the influential use of graphic novels for the collegiate setting. Researchers who study pedagogy in comics will develop stronger arguments on why should the education system consider graphic novels as academic worthy materials and how students perform better through reading educational comics.

Additionally, students will gain a visual and more clarified understanding of social justice (or the lack of) based on graphic novels illustrating themes of social issues in society (Downey, 2009; Shugart, 2009). Researchers can understand the practicality of graphic novels and the improvement of academia’s progress within students’ success and interests. Particularly, students will hopefully challenge themselves by the themes shown in graphic novels, which in result, encourage other students to become active partakers in social justice.
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Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.


