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Graphic Novels v. Original Texts: A Comparison Study in Enjoyment and Comprehension in High School Students

Abstract:

Graphic novels are a growing field of literature, appearing in many school libraries from elementary to high school levels. Publishers are creating graphic novel forms of classic texts. This study examines the need for such texts as it relates to student's comprehension and enjoyment of the storyline. Two classes of similarly apt students are compared in this study, one having studied the graphic novel and one the original text over a four week period. Test scores will reveal comprehension, and student surveys and teacher interviews will show enjoyment.

Introduction:

The last two decades have seen an increase in the production and demand for graphic novels. Award-winning graphic novels such as Maus by Art Spiegelman (1993) and The Sandman by Neil Gaiman (1989) have propelled the genre into popularity. Hoping to catch a ride on the coattails of this success, publishers have begun to create graphic novels forms of canonized literature. This is not exactly a new phenomenon, as we might point to the Great Illustrated Classics brand that has adapted sixty-nine classics into easy-to-read novels with full page illustrations. The Great Illustrated Classics, however, are still comprised of great blocks of text.

Graphic novels often retain little text, preferring to replace description with images. Authors and illustrators achieve this by collaborating to pare down a work of literature and create illustrations to inform the text, creating a novel that reads like a comic book. Despite the shortened text, proponents for graphic novels maintain that they advocate for a different form of literacy. Readers must look toward the illustrations to read body language, facial expressions, and other social nuances that are important to the formation of a mature adult.

Because the genre of graphic novels has grown so quickly, many libraries have purchased these graphic novels with the hope that the format will attract readers to these texts. If a reader gains familiarity with the text at a younger age, it may be easier for them to analyze the unabridged edition in high school or higher education. However, we are uncertain of the necessity or desire for such materials. We would like to create an experiment in which they determine if reading the graphic novel form of a piece of literature has any impact on the student's comprehension or enjoyment of the book.

The findings of this research can potentially impact publication of these books, purchases by school libraries, and use in schools. If the research determines that these graphic novels do not aid in the study of the text, it is likely that school libraries will not continue to purchase the books. Books bought must reflect a need within the curriculum. Unless the public library sees a great deal of circulation of these graphic novels, it is unlikely that they will purchase them either, given that they also deal with budgetary restraints.

Literature Review:

In our preliminary research on the subject of graphic novels in the classroom, we found that there are plenty of advocates for high quality graphic novels as a part of a school's curriculum. In their article "Bringing Graphic Novels into a School Curriculum," authors Katherine T. Bucher and M. Lee Manning fully support the integration of graphic novels into the lesson plans as long as they support a wide range of genres (biography, history, fantasy) and are appropriate for adolescents. They list many books that can be integrated into the curriculum, but not once do they mention replacing a text with this form.

Don Gallo and Stephen Weiner's article, "Bold Books for Innovative Teaching: Show, Don't Tell: Graphic Novels in the Classroom" also support incorporating graphic novels into the classroom. The authors comment, "literary adaptation is one of the standbys of the graphic novel medium." They advocate for using graphic novels as gateways to reading the actual classics as well as using them in conjunction with films adaptations. Gallo and Weiner especially recommend using the graphic novel of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle. The authors continue to explain different types of graphic novels and how they can be used successfully in different situations within the classroom. They also note the format of the graphic novel is conducive to reluctant readers and could be used to lure students into reading.

In Lisa Zunshine's article, "What to Expect When You Pick up a Graphic Novel," she argues that it is easy for a graphic novel to fall short in terms of sociocognitive complexity, meaning that there is a lack of interpretation of another's actions, speech or body language. Jane Austen's novels are filled with moments where the characters find hidden meaning in dialogue or action. Looking at Marvel's

version of Pride and Prejudice, she concludes that it is not a replacement for the original text. She even goes so far to quote another author saying, "...perhaps Butler's *Pride and Prejudice* is mostly used as a "study-guide for high school students who don't want to read the novel." If this is the case, students are not reaping all the benefits from reading the graphic novel besides a general understanding of the plot and characters. This is something we want to explore for ourselves.

Like Lisa Zunshine, Anne Crout Shelley believes the classics teach something that cannot be replaced with graphic novels. She comments in her article "Teaching the Classics in High School" that the classics are difficult for today's youth to read, they "use obscure vocabulary and daunting syntax." While, Shelley acknowledges the classics must be made accessible for young readers today, she advocates using movies, articles, and diaries among other techniques in conjunction with the classics to make them approachable. She asserts that reading the classics bolsters vocabulary. With many of the graphic novels, like the summaries you can find online, vocabulary and nuances of the author are taken out in favor of conveying the plot quickly. Incorporating graphic novels to help explain passages in the curriculum would be useful, but could be detrimental to overall learning if graphic novels were the only medium used.

Author Paula E. Griffith gives evaluation criteria for graphic novels in her article, "Graphic Novels in the Secondary Classroom and School Libraries." Her criteria analyzes the illustrations, the text, and the accuracy of the content. Is the font large enough to be readable? Do the illustrations provide enough context and action to keep the reader moving through the story? Griffith has separate questions

regarding fiction and non-fiction. An example for fiction: Is the conflict relevant and appropriate for your readers? For non-fiction: Is the information interesting enough? The author briefly speaks to the classics saying that as long as the books are true to the story and otherwise meet the criteria, graphic novels of the classes are a good way to make the story more accessible. The graphic novel form combats length and language barriers. Still though, she goes on to say, "Although I may not recommend a class study of a graphic novel, teachers can use parts of graphic novels that merge with their instructional units..."

In creating our experiment, we can look to Linda Valli and Marilyn Chambliss' experiment "Creating Classroom Cultures: One Teacher, Two Lessons, and a High-Stakes Test". Their experiment is structured to observe a teacher giving two different lessons to two classes to determine which lesson is more effective for benchmark testing. Valli and Chambliss used running field notes, audio-taping their class sessions, and interviews with the teacher after the lessons. Some of these techniques could be valuable in our research of graphic novels in school classrooms.

Graphic novels are a burgeoning genre. Research has shown they can be effective in certain circumstances in school classrooms, especially with reluctant readers. However, currently available research gives no concrete evidence of graphic novels as a hindrance or an aide to students in place of literary classics that are presently utilized in many high school classrooms. Our research goals include: discovering if graphic novel versions of classic literature provide the same comprehension of the book, insight into human nature, and ability build vocabulary as the original classic.

Problem Statement:

Graphic novels are written in comic strip form, often comprising of many colorful illustrations and little text. Graphic novel versions of the literary canon are currently being published and purchased by school libraries. Novels like Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen are printed in this new, visual based format. While many researchers support the use of graphic novels in conjunction with the curriculum, there has not been a study to determine if graphic versions of the classics significantly impact a student's enjoyment or comprehension of the text. Research gained from such a study would be useful for teachers seeking to update their reading material and searching to gain an understanding of how students digest information in an increasingly visual world. In our study we will take Marvel's graphic novel of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen and the original text of Pride and Prejudice and test for comprehension and enjoyment between two high school classes.

Conceptual Framework:

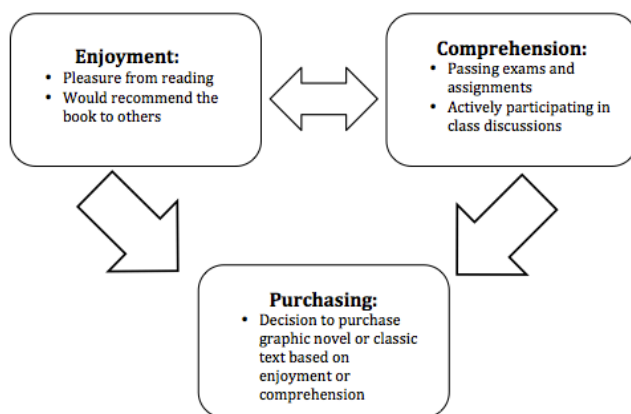


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The above diagram focuses on the two concepts of enjoyment and comprehension and how they influence purchasing decisions. As school librarians strive to purchase materials students will read, enjoyment of the graphic novel or the original novel would lead to schools purchasing one or the other.

Comprehension would also lead to purchasing as one of the main goals of the school library program is to aid and expand curriculum areas. In addition, enjoyment and comprehension affect each other as well. Enjoyment can lead to comprehension as students are more willing to examine passages if they are interested in the material. Comprehension can also lead to enjoyment as it is difficult to enjoy a story you don't understand.

If the students enjoy the text, there is a greater possibility that more students will complete future classic texts or become more interested in reading in general. Both of these are outcomes that would encourage teachers to purchase the more enjoyed text. Looking at both comprehension and enjoyment of two sets of students reading two different types of text will aide teachers and administration with making purchasing decisions.

Research Questions:

We are interested in finding the answers to the following questions:

1. Do students comprehend more from the graphic novel compared to the original text?

Since the graphic novel is shorter and utilizes student's ability to decipher body language and visual cues, student's comprehension may be increased

compared to a text only novel. Many classics are written in a style that is no longer commonly used and may be hard for students to understand.

2. Do students enjoy reading the graphic novel more than the original text?

Because the style of graphic novels lends themselves to a more modern reader, this could lead to greater enjoyment by the students. Using visual cues is something today's teenagers are familiar with already. Reading in a medium that they already enjoy can lead to greater enjoyment of the text at hand.

Procedure:

We will attempt to test these questions by comparing the comprehension and enjoyment of the text between two classes of similarly aged, gendered and apt students with the same instructor, lessons, and exams. For our qualitative data we will first administer a pre-test to ensure that no students are familiar with the text. If there are students that are highly familiar with the text, we will analyze their data separately. After the four week unit of study over Pride and Prejudice/graphic novel version, we would give a survey regarding the students' enjoyment of the text. Our surveys use a mixture of the Likert scale, yes or no questions, and open-ended questions. The surveys can be found in Appendix A and B. We will also conduct an interview with the teacher that will be repeated at the end of every week during the duration of the Pride and Prejudice unit. This interview is composed of purely open-ended questions to assess their opinion of student's responsiveness to the different texts. The teacher interview can be found in Appendix C.

For the quantitative data, the teacher will create and test the comprehension of the novel or graphic novel through his or her own methods. The tests will be the same for all classes. In order to gauge comprehension, we will take the average of the raw test scores and compare the graphic novel class and the original text class using a T-Test. The pre test is important in this step because prior knowledge of the material could potentially skew comprehension data.

Because of the importance placed on grades in a high school setting, students could potentially turn to Sparknotes and other outside sources for information. With this in mind, we acknowledge there are limitations to our study. We can never be sure that there are no outside influences on the test scores. We also can not be certain that the original text students are not reading the graphic novel or vice versa. While this can affect our quantitative data, it may be compensated for in our qualitative data. We are placing an emphasis on the questionnaires and interviews in the hope that students will be honest in the surveys, with faith in the fact that our questions speak directly to the one medium at hand. Also, we've designed our surveys to take into account students who are familiar with the storyline. As stated before, data from these students will be separated and analyzed as their own group. Another limitation is the small sample size. In order to fully examine if graphic novels increase comprehension or enjoyment, this needs to be done among many different classes and teachers.

Data Analysis:

Our research project contains components of both qualitative and quantitative research. However, the quantitative analysis should be relatively easy

to analyze as we are simply comparing test scores of two groups of students using a T-Test to see if the difference between the score are statistically significant. The qualitative section will be more difficult as we need to analyze both the student surveys and teacher interviews.

To analyze the qualitative data, we will use a coding schema. We are defining the unit of analysis as a word or short phrase. Because most of our open-ended questions follow Likert scale questions, we expect to be able to use many of the same categories for coding. Students will have our choice of words to guide their answers, which will be apparent in the data. For our coding scheme, please see Appendix D.

This coding will be used to analyze the data and answer research questions referring to the student's enjoyment of the class text versus the graphic novel. Since student's questionnaires are more structured, we are looking to find more in-depth information in the teacher's interview. Since our end goal is to determine if publishing graphic novel forms of the classics is beneficial to students and teachers, our coding is geared toward student's enjoyment. The qualitative analysis will show if the graphic novel enhances comprehension. This is why our coding is so reliant on emotions and expectations. Once we have data, we can practice our coding and test for consistency. Coding may change if we find our scope is too limited.

Conclusions:

In our research we hope to discover if a graphic novel version of a canonical text can be used as a replacement for the actual text or not. With this in mind for future research, it would be beneficial to discover if this experiment can be

replicated. Because of our limited sample size, the data may not be representative of the greater population of high school students. Other future research could include what schools need publishers to put in graphic novels of classic literature to meet the curriculum. Focusing research on specific graphic novel adaptations could provide this insight. Schools may need to change their curriculum to include graphic novels as they represent increasing visual literacy that is present in today's society.

Appendix A

Previous Exposure and Enjoyment Questionnaire Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen

This questionnaire is designed to gauge your exposure to the plotline of Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. Student who are familiar with the plot bring biases into this study, therefore we would like to know about these biases prior to the experiment. Questions also probe your enjoyment of the text and we would like to study whether this changes by the end of the experiment.

Age:

Gender:

- Male

- Female

- Transgender

What is your grade level?

- 9th Grade

- 10th Grade

- 11th Grade

- 12th Grade

Have you ever read or studied the novel Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen?

yes no

If yes, on a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you enjoy reading Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen?

[1] - Hated the novel

[2] - Disliked the novel

[3] - Neutral

[4] - Enjoyed the novel

[5] - Loved the novel

Have you ever watched or read any materials adapted from Pride and Prejudice? (e.g. The Lizzie Bennet diaries, Bridget Jones' Diary)

yes no

If yes, on a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you enjoy reading or watching the adaptation(s)?

[1] - Hated the adaptation

[2] - Disliked the adaptation

[3] - Neutral

[4] - Enjoyed the adaptation

[5] - Loved the adaptation

How familiar are you with the plot?

Very familiar Somewhat familiar Not familiar

Do you expect to have trouble reading the novel? If so, why?

Appendix B

Pride and Prejudice Enjoyment Questionnaire

This questionnaire is designed to gauge student's enjoyment from reading and studying Pride and Prejudice in a classroom setting.

Age:

Gender:

- Male

- Female

- Transgender

What is your grade level?

- 9th Grade

- 10th Grade

- 11th Grade

- 12th Grade

Did you read Pride and Prejudice the novel or see an adaptation of the novel previously to this class?

Yes

No

Did you finish reading Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen?

Yes

No

If not, why did you stop reading?

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you enjoy reading Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen?

[1] - Hated the novel

[2] - Somewhat hated the novel

[3] - Neutral towards the novel

[4] - Enjoyed the novel

[5] - Loved the novel

On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you comprehend reading Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen?

[1] - Poor

[2] - Fair

[3] - Satisfactory

[4] - Good

[5] - Excellent

Would you recommend this novel to other people?

Yes

No

Do you have a favorite part of the book?

Yes

No

If yes, explain the scene:

On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely are you to watch or read an adaptation of the novel?

[1] - Not at all likely

[2] - Slightly likely

[3] - Neutral

[4] - Somewhat likely

[5] - Highly likely

Please explain why you did or did not enjoy the novel.

Appendix C

Teacher Interview

This interview will be used to give insights to the learning environment of the classroom and the responsiveness of the students to the different texts throughout the unit.

Are the students answering questions and engaging in class discussions about the novels?

For the novel, do students react to the length and language used?

For the graphic novel, do students react to the illustrations or the language used?

Are you students completing the assigned reading? How do the different classes compare in this respect?

Appendix D
Coding Schema

Coding Schema	
Previous Exposure and Enjoyment Questionnaire	
Demographic Information	Age
	Gender
	Grade Level
Emotions: Student's Feelings regarding the book and adaptations	worry
	excitement
	dread
Expectations: Student's feelings regarding the upcoming reading of the book/graphic novel	grades
	enjoyment
	plot
	language
Enjoyment Questionnaire	
Demographic Information	age
	Gender
	Grade Level
Reading Preferences: Information about enjoying the book or graphic novel	characters
	romance
	tension
	language
	details

	dialogue
	history
	literary devices
	illustrations
Teacher Survey	
Student behavior: information regarding the student's participation in discussion	engagement
	participation
	questioning
	passion
	complacency
	completion of assignments
	test/quiz scores
Reading Preferences of Students: Information regarding reaction to the book/graphic novel	characters
	romance
	tension
	language
	details
	dialogue
	history
	literary devices
	illustrations

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