

USING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOL AND LIBRARIES TO PROMOTE LITERACIES

Faezal Muniran¹ and Md Ridzal Md Yusof²

¹Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM),
Melaka, Malaysia

²Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS),
Bangi, Malaysia.

e-mail: gibraltar_devlin@yahoo.com; ridzalyusof@kuis.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The majorities of comics and graphic novels readers are children and teenagers. Living in the society dominated by printed and electronic media, there is a huge demand for a variety of information sources ranging from films, television shows, magazines and the Internet. Exposures from these sources also affect the learning process in school and classroom. Apart from films, the dynamic style and presentation with infused visual storytelling in comics and graphic novel are making these medium much more interesting than textbooks. Using comics and graphic novels in schools and libraries will help to encourage the undeveloped and special needs students to get into reading and promote literacies. Although comics are always being associated with humor, heavier themes and genre (such as humanity, fiction, fantasy, religion and history) contents can also be delivered in much simpler and interesting way with this medium. Involvement and continuous support from the comic industry (Comic artist and cartoonist, publisher), academic institution (schools, libraries, researchers, universities) together with the government is crucial in realizing these efforts. This paper will look forward into the potential collaborative roles, functions and awareness of using comics and graphic novels as teaching and learning aid in the classroom and library.

Keywords: Literacy; Reading promotion; Comics; Graphic novels; Reluctant readers

INTRODUCTION

Comics and graphic novels are not for leisure reading or just a hobby anymore. It has in fact become a major industry that contributes to the country's economic growth. Although it has been one of the major contributor for the economy in the United States of America and Japan, the role of comics and graphic novels as a new form of literature in schools and library should be studied. The main discussion of this paper will concentrate on the roles and advantages of these mediums. The importance and the difference between comics and graphic novels will also be stressed so that this medium to be taken seriously as another form of modern literature. For the sole purpose of this research, we will refer to graphic novels as the suitable source for discussing its roles in the schools and libraries.

DEFINITION

Scott McCloud, a theorist and a comic critics explained that comics uses sequential pictures to deliver information (McCloud1994). The pioneer of graphic novels, Will Eisner suggested that graphic novel is 'Sequential Art' that consists of arranged pictures and words to deliver ideas in the form of storytelling (Eisner 1985). In 1978, the term 'graphic novels' was used to describe the collected works of newspaper comic strips by Will Eisner entitled 'A Contract with God' into a book form. According to the local expert and comic theorist, Professor Dr. Mulyadi Mahamood, comics are illustrations that contain storytelling texts and pictures in horizontal boxes or panels (Mulyadi 2000).

Although the basic concept and definition of comics and graphic novels are similar, the presentation and format of these two mediums are different (Lee 2004). Normally, comics are produced serially in a pamphlet or magazine format, with a light and easy theme as the story background. Graphic novels on the other hand requires a much more structured and complex storyline using heavier themes as compared to the comics. The production quality of these graphic novels are normally superior than the normal comic magazines with full colour printing on glossy paper and hardcover binding in a thick book size format. Thus, the physical difference and the intellectuality of this medium should be fully comprehended (Laycock 2008).

PERCEPTION AND ACCEPTANCE OF COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOLS

It is important to understand comics and graphic novels as a format and not a genre. Otherwise, they will be both perceived as the same with their presentations, themes and contents. Genres can revolve around superhero, fantasy, science fiction, history, action adventure and humour (Lee 2004). There are always the stereotypical misconceptions towards these mediums that they always carry negative contents which influence children and teenagers and encourage violence (Hill & Robyn 2003). This is the same misconception that discourage these mediums to be used as serious literature materials in schools. It is hard to understand why these mediums are still being outcast although history has proven that storytelling with pictures and texts has been around since the pre-historic cave paintings, tombs of the ancient egyptian to the pre-columbian documents and the famous *Bayeux Tapestry*.

There are several factors that caused these misconceptions. Misunderstanding, lack of knowledge, and exposures from educator as well as the public themselves in judging the comics and graphic novels have negatively made them outcast. However, these negative perceptions and worries are not new. These stereotypical beliefs that the nature of comics as light entertainment and reading materials and only suitable for children has been around from the early age of comic history.

Today comics or more commonly referred to as graphic novels are not just for entertainment. Comics have become much more complex than before. It contain multi genres with much serious and heavier themes. There are many classic literature titles that have been adapted into graphic novels and it has been proven that comics can help the teachers to develop special reading literacy skills among students (Schwarz 2002). The worldwide craze among film industries that adapted popular graphic novels' titles into multi-million box office has also helped to boost the popularity of these mediums. On the academic level, there are international exhibitions, workshops and seminars conducted every year while schools and libraries are encouraged to have their own shelves collection of graphic novels.

The conclusion is, the right understanding of education and exposure in differentiating between comics and novel graphics has to be strengthened and implemented if we want to change the negative misconception towards these mediums. Educators and librarians should be aware that graphic novels is a form of modern literature that is as good as than any other conventional reading materials (Brenner 2004).

THE ROLE OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN SCHOOLS

Children and teenager are the major audience that are well exposed to the films, television, electronic billboards, video games, Internet and magazines where they learn to linked visuals and storytelling (Ireland 2004). This kind of visual stimulations has challenged and affected our learning and teaching processes. Nowadays, teaching through static texts is not just dull but also impractical (Lyga & Lyga 2004). Since school children and teenagers are well exposed to comics and graphic novels, out of school experiences can be adapted into the school curriculum and libraries to help enhance literacy and understanding among students (Newkirk 2002).

Reading motivation

Motivation has played an important role in education, especially motivation to read. For parents and teachers, motivating the children and students to read is not easy an task. This is because, some children behave and react differently with books. Some of them would show a great interest in books at an early age while some other would not be as eager to even open a book. The lack of reading skills and motivation among reluctant readers (Laycock 2008) could cause some of them being left behind in their education (Gambrell et. al 1996).

Comics and graphic novels could help to build students' interest and motivation to read (Laycock 2008). There are students who have problems in reading due to the lack of interesting visual supports in books. They need good visual supports to help them reading with better understanding of the contents (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson 2003; Lyga & Lyga 2004). This is because the combination of texts and visuals are much more engaging for this group of students to actively participate in the reading activities (Kerr & Culhane 2000).

Teaching and learning in schools curriculum

In schools, learning activities should use lots of materials with texts and visuals. The images and graphics could broaden the skills, the intellectual potential and also the aesthetic values of the students. It will also sharpen their analytical skills when participating in these kind of activities (Laycock, 2008). Comics and novel graphics could express ideas, create characters and raise issues in a complex storytelling form and it is more interesting compared to the other form of literature such as poems, novels or even films. The advantage and strength of comics and graphic novels medium lies on its successful combination of texts and visuals (Versaci 2005).

In evaluating the roles of graphic novels and its place in the school curriculum, this medium should be able to assist and support the teaching proces and the results should be able to contribute to the content structure of the curriculum, thus injecting the need and interest towards the development of critical thinking of students. Using graphic novels in school curriculum should also be beneficial to the reluctant readers group encouraging them to read and learn creatively (Laycock 2008).

Other than improving the interest to learn, this medium has the potential to strengthen the linguistic and communication skills (Lyga & Lyga 2004). Students with advanced linguistic levels will be much more creative when writing, reading and telling stories. Therefore, it should heighten their imagination within the panels and pages of these graphic novels.

For the '*visual learners*' group of students, they will become much more sensitive and attuned to the relation that exists within the elements of colours, lines, shapes, forms and space used in graphic novels (Armstrong 2001). All these attractive elements and images will make the graphic novels more acceptable among children and teenage boys as they are the majority of the '*visual learners*' students (Gurian 2002).

GRAPHIC NOVELS AS A LIBRARY COLLECTION

The learning process should not end in the classroom. References and additional reading materials should be available in the school and public libraries where there are space and facilities for the students to easily access information and knowledge. With the addition of graphic novels' collection, the libraries should be able to change students' perception and attitude towards school and public libraries. The demand for these books will be beneficial for everyone when the readers also become active contributor in the development of graphic novels collection.

With different type of genres, readers could use these graphic novels for a series of discussion on education (Hill 2003). Students can also download and access selected titles of graphic novels from either the library media centre or the internet (Lee 2004).

These graphic novels collection in the library will also be useful in education. With the right and effective awareness campaign, these efforts will attract more readers and the public to explore the benefits of library (Gorman 2002).

CHALLENGES AND OTHER RELATED ISSUES

One of the major issues that arise when discussing the suitable title selections for these books as library collection are the contents. Since the graphic novels are not just texts but also visuals, titles with violence, sexual explicit and crimes inducing contents should be avoided. The obligation to restrict access or censorship should include the reader's sensitivities, location, cultures and religions (Gorman 2002).

A policy guideline should be made for the title selections. However not all guidelines and policies will fit and adhere to the criterias set by the publishers of the graphic novels. Knowledge and awareness of policy change is important.

The idea of using graphic novels in the school curriculum maybe new to most of us. Continuous reading for new knowledge, with an open mind, interest and awareness can be developed to fully appreciate this wonderful and underrated form of art and literature.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Most comics and graphic novels collection are from America and Japan. Although some themes and genres are suitable enough, some cultural values, social issues and the languages like Japanese, French, Chinese or even English are still foreign to us. There should be more local titles to choose from. In Malaysia, there should more literature works being adapted from its original format into comics and graphic novels.

Most comics and graphic novels are being published into the commercial markets and has little to do with the school education and curriculum contents. Therefore, only

suitable titles should be used in the classroom. The needs and attention from the comic creator and the publisher to produce more comic and graphic novels for the education should be highly encouraged.

Research and development in this field are also important. There should be more seminars, workshops and exhibitions conducted annually to create the awareness amongst the public. Full support from the government and industries are needed to help with the policies and finance. In schools, teachers should be exposed to these topics and how they can help in educating the younger generations to be better educators and intellectuals of the future.

CONCLUSION

The early perception that comics and graphic novels were nothing more than just cheap entertainment has changed. Now, we have realised that these mediums have opened up many hidden potentials in helping and contributing towards reading literacy among students in different stages of education.

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