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Review of Katie Monnin’s Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom

By Susan Spangler

In the introduction to her book, Teaching Graphic Novels: Practical Strategies for the Secondary ELA Classroom (Maupin House 2010), Katie Monnin recalls the day she realized the importance of teaching graphic literature to students: September 11, 2001. Monnin realized that most of her students had no idea how to process the images they saw on the news that day, and she wanted to remedy that situation. Today’s students, who according to the National Council of Teachers of English (2008) need “a wide range of abilities and competencies in order to be considered literate, must have instruction in managing and processing the streams of information they are bombarded with on a minutely basis from a variety of sources and in a variety of forms. Whether they turn on Sports Center or open up their Facebook page, students simultaneously see images, read text, listen to audio and watch streaming video. In Teaching Graphic Novels, Monnin teaches educators how to help students manage these streams of information with specific lessons on developing a graphic novel vocabulary, story mapping, and other metacognitive skills. Monnin’s book is a good start in teaching students to understand the complexities of multimedia environments.

Monnin clearly knows her subjects, both graphic literature and education. As a classroom teacher, Monnin speaks from personal experience, and she advocates a metacognitive approach in the sample lessons included in Teaching Graphic Novels. Early lessons in the book call for student metacognition as they take ownership of their reading processes by articulating
their understanding of both the words and images they are decoding in graphic novels. In one lesson, for example, students label the reading strategies they are using to read different kinds of panels in a text. In later lessons, students make personal connections (by articulating the “text potential”) and retell a graphic story. Metacognition is again involved when students reflect on what they already know about a story and relate it to their own lives. The reading strategies Monnin advances in her lessons are simple but effective: Have students tell you what they know and propose ways to learn what they don’t.

As an experienced teacher, I appreciated the tone Monnin creates in the book. She takes on the tone of a colleague, treating readers as knowledgeable and competent by showing them how to think about the medium, not what to think about specific books. Each lesson, for instance, encourages teachers to select a graphic novel of their choice; each lesson can apply to any graphic novel, not one specific one. She knows that readers can discern their own students’ abilities and will be able to make informed decisions about what will work in their classrooms for students of different grades levels and different reading abilities. This was especially evident in the chapter on English Language Learners, in which Monnin adeptly proves that good teaching is helpful for improving ALL students’ comprehension, not just ELLs’. The author specifically addresses the needs of ELLs with an informational chart on the stages of language learning as well as detailed suggestions for activities tailored for each level. Activities such as the creation of vocabulary index cards that Monnin offers are suitable not only for ELLs but for all students in developing their language skills.

Because she is a classroom teacher, Monnin also anticipates my questions about some of her lessons (“Do students really need to do three worksheets for one lesson?”) and satisfactorily
explains the rationale for the lessons’ methodology ("Yes, because the NCTE/IRA ELA standards mandate that students use a variety of strategies to comprehend literary texts, and each worksheet helps students practice and demonstrate a different cognitive strategy"). The use of so many worksheets seemed to me at first like overkill, but the author provides a rationale that’s hard to argue against. Like any good teacher, Monnin pays attention to ELA standards and articulates how her lessons meet them. The clear link between the lessons and standards both shows Monnin’s extensive background in education and justifies the formal teaching of graphic literature.

The only stumble in the book is the section on middle- and high-school persuasive writing assignments, which are a bit muddled in purpose and format, and which direct students away from authentic kinds of writing. These writing assignments ask students to write a persuasive essay that compares/contrasts elements of story in a graphic novel and print-text novel. No audience or authentic forum is suggested for this academic exercise. While the assignment recommends that students use a comparison/contrast strategy in organizing their paragraphs, there is no advice on what students are to persuade their (hypothetical) reader of, making these writing assignments confusing.

The step-by-step lessons, adapted for different grades levels, are clearly the greatest strength of Teaching Graphic Novels, and they are supplemented by the appendices, which contain everything from classroom handouts to reference lists for further reading on graphic literature to lists of traditional novels that have been adapted into graphic ones. Other strengths include Monnin’s ideas for teaching both middle-school creative writing and media literacy with graphic novels. If you’re just getting started with graphic literature, this book (along with the
blog of the same name at http://teachinggraphicnovels.blogspot.com) is a primer that will spark many ideas to keep you investigating the medium for months to come.

Sources
