Stigma, Leveling, and Relevancy with Graphic Novels

by the Comics Appreciation Project (CAP) a 501c3 nonprofit organization

STIGMA

Connors, S. P. (2010). " The Best of Both Worlds": Rethinking the Literary Merit of Graphic Novels. *ALAN Review, 37*(3), 65-70. [cited by: 48]

> **"They have a history, and the stigmas that trail in their wake are capable of shaping our perceptions of them as a form of reading material."** (p. 68)

Hansen, K. S. (2012). In Defense of Graphic Novels. *English Journal, 102*(2), 57-62. [cited by: 73]

> **"The stigma of graphic novels being the province of struggling readers threatens to keep other students away from the form."** (p. 60)

Kukkonen, K. (2011). Comics as a test case for transmedial narratology. *SubStance, 40*(1), 34-52. [cited by: 115]

> **"A long-standing prejudice about comics is that they tell their stories in words and images, but in a way that does not fully do justice to either mode. In their use of words and dialogue, they fall short of the novel. In their use of images and composition, they fall short of the fine arts…if we want to extend narratology across media, we should not remain tied to these assumptions."** (p. 40)

Tilley, C. L. (2012). Seducing the innocent: Fredric Wertham and the falsifications that helped condemn comics. *Information & Culture, 47*(3), 383-413. [cited by: 238]

> **"In light of the source evidence now available for independent verification, Wertham's book appears clearly to be an attempt at cultural correction rather than an honest report of scientific inquiry, whether from a psychiatric or a social sciences perspective"** (p. 404)

LEVELING & TEXT COMPLEXITY

ALA (2023). Interpretations of library Bill of Rights.
https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/rating-systems

> **"Rating systems appearing in library catalogs or discovery systems present distinct challenges to intellectual freedom principles. The American Library Association affirms the rights of individuals to form their own opinions about resources they choose to read or view."**

AASL (2021). Position Statement on Labeling Practices
https://www.ala.org/sites/default/files/aasl/content/advocacy/statements/docs/AASL_Labeling_Practices_Position_Statement_2021a.pdf

> **"School librarians should resist labeling or arranging books by any readability scale and should instead advocate for the development of policies that do not require library staff to restrict access to books based on reading level."**

Baines, L. (1996). From page to screen: When a novel Is interpreted for film, what gets lost in the translation? *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 39*(8) 612-622. [cited by: 29]

> **"Because films rely on visual stimuli more than words to communicate, dialogue from novels is often simplified, eliminated, or integrated into the action of a screenplay, and expository passages of some length are often presented in a camera shot or two."** (p. 618)

Connors, S. P. (2012). Altering perspectives: How the implied reader invites us to rethink the difficulty of graphic novels. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 85*(1), 33-37. [cited by: 30]

> **"Given the breadth of the repertoire on which graphic novels draw [literary, artistic, factual, cinematic, and cultural], the act of reading them might be thought to constitute a complex undertaking.** (p. 34)

Council of Chief State School Officers (2017). Supplemental Information for Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy: New Research on Text Complexity.

> **"In CCSS, qualitative measures serve as a necessary complement to quantitative measures, which cannot capture all of the elements that make a text easy or challenging to read and are not equally successful in rating the complexity of all categories of text."** (p. 4)

Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2012). Guided reading: The romance and the reality. *The Reading Teacher, 66*(4), 268-284. [cited by: 452]

> **"Educators have sometimes made the mistake of thinking that guided reading is the reading program or that all of the books students read should be leveled. We have argued against the overuse of levels. We have never recommended that the school library or classroom libraries be leveled or that levels be reported to parents."** (p. 281)

Glasswell, K., & Ford, M. (2011). Let's start leveling about leveling. *Language Arts, 88*(3), 208-216. [cited by: 44]

> **"If leveling frameworks now carry so much weight in teachers' decisions and the subsequent consequences for children, then educators have a right to expect that these systems are valid, reliable, and practically relevant."** (p. 211)

Glaus, M. (2014). Text complexity and young adult literature: Establishing its place. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 57*(5), 407-416. [cited by: 115]

> **"Quantitative measurements of text complexity do not and cannot consider varied levels of meaning, text structures, and sophisticated themes…more weight should be given to qualitative measures of text complexity for narrative fiction."** (p. 409)

Hayes, D. P., & Ahrens, M. G. (1988). Vocabulary simplification for children: A special case of 'motherese'?. *Journal of Child Language, 15*(2), 395-410. [cited by: 602]

> **"A rare term is one that does not appear among the 10,000 most common types, is not a proper name or number, and is not an inflected form of some term included among the first 10,000."** (p. 399)

[Their study found that comic books help build vocabulary, averaging 53.5 rare words per 1,000, even more than adult books.]

> **"The time a child spends reading books, including comic books, is time lexically well-spent."** (p. 408)

Selected Statistics for Major Sources of Spoken and Written Language (Sample Means)		
	Rank of Median Word	Rare Words per 1000
I. Printed texts		
Abstracts of scientific articles	4389	128.0
Newspapers	1690	68.3
Popular magazines	1399	65.7
Adult books	1058	52.7
Comic books	867	53.5
Children's books	627	30.9
Preschool books	578	16.3
II. Television texts		
Popular prime-time adult shows	490	22.7
Popular prime-time children's shows	543	20.2
Cartoon shows	598	30.8
Mr. Rogers and *Sesame Street*	413	2.0
III. Adult speech		
Expert witness testimony	1008	28.4
College graduates to friends, spouses	496	17.3

Adapted from Hayes and Ahrens (1988).

Hoffman, J.V. (2017). What If "Just Right" Is Just Wrong? The Unintended Consequences of Leveling Readers. *The Reading Teacher, 71*(3), 265–273. [cited by: 62]

> **"The construct of reading levels and 'just right' texts…has been from the start, deeply flawed with unintended consequences for students and teachers that limit more than they enrich, that penalize more than they promote, and that divide more than they unite."** (p. 265)

Kelly, L. B., & Kachorsky, D. (2021). Text Complexity and Picturebooks: Learning from Multimodal Analysis and Children's Discussion. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 38*(1), 33–50. [cited by: 15]

> **"We found that playing with genre conventions, stretching across several pages, relying on scientific background knowledge, and using metafictive devices in illustrations all contributed layers of complexity that quantitative measures of text readability do not usually account for."** (p. 44)

"We are not aware of (and would not support) efforts to level visuals for young children, but we encourage researchers in text complexity to consider visual elements as features typically under-accounted for in existing models." (p. 46)

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers (2010). Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects: Appendix A. Washington, DC.

"Built on prior research, the four qualitative factors described below are offered here as a first step in the development of robust tools for the qualitative analysis of text complexity." (p. 5)

Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric[1]

LITERATURE

Text Title_____   Text Author_____

	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
TEXT STRUCTURE	○ **Organization:** Is intricate with regard to such elements as point of view, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail	○ **Organization:** May include subplots, time shifts and more complex characters	○ **Organization:** May have two or more storylines and occasionally be difficult to predict	○ **Organization:** Is clear, chronological or easy to predict
	○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, illustrations or graphics are essential for understanding the meaning of the text	○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, illustrations or graphics support or extend the meaning of the text	○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, a range of illustrations or graphics support selected parts of the text	○ **Use of Graphics:** If used, either illustrations directly support and assist in interpreting the text or are not necessary to understanding the meaning of the text
LANGUAGE FEATURES	○ **Conventionality:** Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	○ **Conventionality:** Fairly complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language	○ **Conventionality:** Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning	○ **Conventionality:** Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand
	○ **Vocabulary:** Complex, generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading	○ **Vocabulary:** Fairly complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic	○ **Vocabulary:** Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic	○ **Vocabulary:** Contemporary, familiar, conversational language
	○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly complex sentences with several subordinate clauses or phrases; sentences often contain multiple concepts	○ **Sentence Structure:** Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	○ **Sentence Structure:** Primarily simple and compound sentences, with some complex constructions	○ **Sentence Structure:** Mainly simple sentences
MEANING	○ **Meaning:** Multiple competing levels of meaning that are difficult to identify, separate, and interpret; theme is implicit or subtle, often ambiguous and revealed over the entirety of the text	○ **Meaning:** Multiple levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify or separate; theme is implicit or subtle and may be revealed over the entirety of the text	○ **Meaning:** Multiple levels of meaning clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety	○ **Meaning:** One level of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text.
KNOWLEDGE DEMANDS	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores complex, sophisticated or abstract themes; experiences portrayed are distinctly different from the common reader	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores themes of varying levels of complexity or abstraction; experiences portrayed are uncommon to most readers	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores several themes; experiences portrayed are common to many readers	○ **Life Experiences:** Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers
	○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Some references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	○ **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements

[1] Adapted from Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies and Science and Technical Subjects (2010).

"The Lexile framework, like traditional formulas, may underestimate the difficulty of texts that use simple, familiar language to convey sophisticated ideas, as is true of much high-quality fiction written for adults and appropriate for older students." (p. 7)

"Some widely used quantitative measures, including the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test and the Lexile Framework for Reading, rate the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *Grapes of Wrath* as appropriate for grades 2–3. This counterintuitive result emerges because works such as *Grapes* often express complex ideas in relatively commonplace language (familiar words and simple syntax), especially in the form of dialogue that mimics everyday speech. Until widely available quantitative tools can better account for factors recognized as making such texts challenging, including multiple levels of meaning and mature themes, preference should likely be given to qualitative measures of text complexity when evaluating narrative fiction intended for students in grade 6 and above." (p. 8)

Schade Eckert, L. (2013). Protecting pedagogical choice: Theory, graphic novels, and textual complexity. *Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 29*(1), 40-43. [cited by: 16]

"Appendix A notes 'unconventional text' as a key concept in determining textual complexity, citing figurative and ironic language, complex and sophisticated themes, and cultural and literary knowledge as specific criteria." (p. 41)

"To return to the definition of "text complexity" from Appendix A of the Common Core Standards, I argue that reading and analyzing graphic novels meet the criteria noted [for 'unconventional text']: they include figurative language, complex and sophisticated themes, and require cultural and literary knowledge." (p. 43)

RELEVANCY & EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS

Aldahash, R., & Altalhab, S. (2020). The effect of graphic novels on EFL learners' reading comprehension. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, 9*(5), 19-26. [cited by: 33]

"reading graphic novels improves the students' focus and attention to detail compared to text-only works, thus leading to continued engagement with the reading material" (p. 23). Out of the 66 students, those who read the graphic novel scored 22% higher than the control group."

"The experimental group outperformed the control group and achieved better reading test scores, thereby suggesting that reading appropriate graphic novels may have a significant positive effect on intermediate school students' reading comprehension" (p. 24).

Cook, M. P. (2016). Now I "See": The Impact of Graphic Novels on Reading Comprehension in High School English Classrooms. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 56*(1), 21–53. [cited by: 72]

"Students who read the graphic novel [adaptation] significantly outperformed their peers who read only the traditional text." (p. 41)

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich, K. E. (2001). What reading does for the mind. *Journal of Direct Instruction, 1*(2), 137-149. [cited by: 2,026]

"We should provide all children, regardless of their achievement levels, with as many reading experiences as possible." (p. 147)

Evans, M. D., Kelley, J., Sikora, J., & Treiman, D. J. (2010). Family scholarly culture and educational success: Books and schooling in 27 nations. Research in social stratification and mobility, 28(2), 171-197.[cited by: 766]

"On average, 7 years of education separate those who grew up without books in the home from those who grew up with 500 or more…a home library is as important as parents' education, the most important variable in the standard educational attainment model…a child from a 500-book family is 36 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than an otherwise similar child without a home library" (p. 179-180) **even when controlling for household income, father's occupation, and parental educational attainment**.

Gavigan, K. (2011). More powerful than a locomotive: Using graphic novels to motivate struggling male adolescent readers. *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults, 1*(3), 1-12. [cited by: 64]

"In terms of this study, reading graphic novels improved the participants' reading engagement and had a positive effect on their reading motivation. Furthermore, the use of graphic novels helped to aid the participants' knowledge of vocabulary and facilitated their reading comprehension." (p. 6)

Hansen, K. S. (2012). In Defense of Graphic Novels. *English Journal, 102*(2), 57-62. [cited by: 73]

"The argument of lazy readership discounts the power and impact of images…in fact, images often convey a richness and depth of ideas that require interpretation and high-level critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation skills." (p. 59)

"Artists can communicate through their visual presentations of information, allowing the graphic novel to be an excellent vehicle to teach the concepts of symbolism, foreshadowing, metaphor, and many other literary devices." (p. 62)

Jennings, K. A., Rule, A. C., & Vander Zanden, S. M. (2014). Fifth graders' enjoyment, interest, and comprehension of graphic novels compared to heavily-illustrated and traditional novels. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 6*(2), 257. [cited by: 81]

"Survey results showed that the students reading graphic novels reported greater enjoyment of reading and stronger interest in the story than when reading either of the other two novel forms…the use of graphic novels also improved student comprehension and deeper understanding of reading material." (p. 272)

Jiménez, L. M., Roberts, K. L., Brugar, K. A., Meyer, C. K., & Waito, K. (2017). Moving our can(n)ons: Toward an appreciation of multimodal texts in the classroom. *The Reading Teacher, 71*(3), 363-368. [cited by: 52]

"Reading graphic novels also entails deep comprehension of images and even empty space, and perhaps more importantly, the ability to combine text and graphical elements to infer what is not directly written in the text." (p. 364)

Low, D. (2012). 'Spaces Invested with Content': Crossing the 'Gaps' in Comics with Readers in Schools. *Children's Literature in Education, 43*(4), 368-385. [cited by: 97]

"Comics can be used not merely as stepping stones toward 'better' literature but as complex works of literature in their own right that can enable students to develop into critical readers." (p. 375)

Richardson, E. M. (2017). Graphic novels are real books: Comparing graphic novels to traditional text novels. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin, 83*(5), 24-31. [cited by: 46]

"The dilemma of a struggling reader is finding books he or she enjoys reading, and, similarly, the dilemma of a teacher of a struggling reader is to get the young person to read so he or she improves." (p. 24)