

## An Online Book Club with Graphic Novels

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Graphic novels have a place in the classroom. Carter (2007) defined them as “book-length sequential art narrative featuring an anthology-style collection of comic art, a collection of reprinted comic book issues comprising a single story line (or arc), or an original, stand-alone graphic narrative” (p. 1).. Not only do they have the potential to reach a range of student interests, they can also reach a variety of students’ zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Readers of all kinds, including struggling readers, of all ages and across elementary, middle and high school grade levels can benefit from graphic novels. This format offers a range of topics and covers a variety of issues, giving readers a multitude of options from which to choose (Pantaleo, 2011).

Increased motivation for reading has been noted as one benefit to including graphic novels in the classroom. In Brenna’s study (2013) of the connection between comprehension and graphic novels in a fourth grade classroom, the fourth grade teacher noted an increased preference for graphic novels when reading for pleasure among the students participating in the study. Additionally, she had to remind students to put them away when they needed to work on other subjects. Increased circulation in school libraries, sparking interest in male students in particular, and creating new

readers are just a few of the benefits of using graphic novels (Carter, 2009).

Another advantage of graphic novels is they “can teach literacy skills and critical thinking in ways that other formats can’t” (Rapp, 2012, p. 64). This is primarily because graphic novels include text and visual images, which work together to encode meaning (Park, 2016). The multimodal structure of these types of novels includes blending the text and pictures, enhancing the reader’s comprehension of the story (Pantaleo, 2011). Making connections across these text elements and making predictions, which require the reader to make inferences, is an important part of literacy supported by this format. Because every action cannot be depicted in pictures, these novels require readers to infer what is not pictured. These inferences not only help readers enhance their understanding of the story, but they also encourage application of literacy skills necessary for comprehension (Rapp, 2012).

Graphic novels also benefit students who are struggling and/or reluctant readers by promoting engagement, especially for readers who need extra help (Cook, 2016), as well as English Language Learners. According to Chun (2009), engagement in reading also reinforces achievement. In addition to promoting engagement, the comprehension

skills of struggling readers is aided by reading graphic novels (Brenna, 2012). Further, this format can encourage students who may be hesitant to choose books comprised of only text to be more likely to read (Cook, 2016). Finally, the multi-modality of text and visuals aid readers in making meaning from the reading (Park, 2016).

Because of the many benefits to readers, and because graphic novels can offer a number of teaching opportunities, I chose to include an assignment developed by Dr. Jaime Coyne and me using graphic novels in one of my university courses for pre-service teachers. During a course entitled *The Middle Level Child*, offered at a mid-size university in southeast Texas, a group of 14 pre-service educators participated in an online book club as part of a class assignment. All of the participants were female and were elementary level education majors. Prior to this book club, none of the participants had previously read a graphic novel. Initially, they were unsure about whether or not they would enjoy this type of book; by the end of the assignment, the students reported that they did enjoy reading their graphic novels.

The curriculum for this course includes the developmental changes, such as emotional development, physical development and cognitive development that children undergo from birth through adolescence. Because of this focus, students were asked to read one of four young adult graphic novels that were related to and appropriate for this age range of readers.

Students formed four separate book club groups, and each group was asked to choose which graphic novel they wanted to read from an online list of current Young Adult graphic novels. The list was offered by the Young Adult Library Services Association and entitled *Great Graphic Novels for Teens*. To ensure stu-

dents would be interested in and motivated to read their books, they had the freedom to self-select the books they wanted to read. The only criteria for their selections were that the books needed to be graphic novels; in addition, the books should be written for a young adult audience about issues in which a young adult audience would be interested. From the list, students selected the following texts: *El Deafo* by Cece Bell; *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson; *Roller Girl* by Victoria Jamieson; and *Tru Detective* by Norah McClintock. Students selected these texts based on their interest in the books' topics as well as their availability in the university library.

After my students selected the books, each group was then asked to create a reading schedule for their books (see Appendix for sample schedule). I wanted to provide some structure to the online book clubs, but at the same time, I wanted students to have as much control as possible within that structure.

Students participated in a total of three online book club meetings using the discussion board tool on Blackboard, an online learning tool used by the university. Each of the three book club discussions had a different focus, and students were given a great deal of flexibility and choice regarding how they approached each discussion.

For the first book club meeting, students were given a list of social issues questions from which to choose to direct the discussion. The questions were taken from *Read-Write-Think* (2009) written by Darla Salay. The social issues addressed in the questions included the ideas of fairness, gender, race, class, and power. Each group selected two to three questions from the list to post online to guide their book club meeting. Some of the questions they chose include the

following:

1. What person or group do you think is being treated differently or unfairly?
2. Who is responsible for the unfair treatment in the story, and what are the characters' reactions to the unfair situation?
3. Which person or group is controlling another person or group? <sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> What are the characters' reactions to the power structure?
4. Is one individual preventing another from living the way he or she wants to live? If so, explain how.

Students were then required to post an individual response to the questions as well as to respond to at least two other group members. This was required for all three online discussions.

For the second book club meeting, each group created two to three questions over the chosen book about topics related to early adolescence. They were to consider the course readings and class discussions when creating these questions. Some of the questions the groups created include the following:

- 1). Have you ever gone through major changes in your appearance while discovering your identity? If so, explain how;
- 2). Have you and a friend ever had a disagreement due to different interests?;

3). What kind of emotions do you think Truman is experiencing because of his friends murder and investigation? (for the graphic novel *Tru Detective*); and

4). Is CiCi getting the support she needs from her teachers? (for the graphic novel *El Deafo*).

For the final book club meeting, students were again asked to write two to three questions. This time, they were asked to create questions related to the following areas: what the novel teaches early adolescents, and how it relates to their lives and interests; how the pre-service teachers could eventually use their novels when teaching early adolescent students; and how their novels addressed the developmental needs of early adolescents. Some of the questions included the following:

1). What emotional development characteristics does Nimona show throughout the book that is similar to those of an early adolescent?;

2). For what we learned from *Roller Girl*, what can we take from this to incorporate in our classrooms?;

3). Does the protagonist feel accepted the way she is (at home, neighborhood, and school)? Why or why not? (for the graphic novel *El Deafo*); and

4). What does this novel teach early adolescents? (for the graphic novel *Tru Detective*).

The participants reported an overall positive response to the book clubs. One student stated about the novel *Tru Detective*, “I feel like this novel teaches early adolescents that life can and will be a roller coaster. One minute someone can be in your life and then not be the next. They need to learn to appreciate the people in their life and to realize when someone needs help.” Another student wrote this response, “I think this graphic novel (*Tru Detective*) can teach several important lessons to adolescents. I think the main lesson to be taught is to not take for granted the people in your life. I think it can teach how fast life can change for the good or bad. I think it helps adolescents understand life may not always be happy go lucky and that bad things can happen.”

In particular, the students indicated that they saw many areas where adolescents could benefit and learn from these graphic novels in their future classrooms. For example, one student wrote, “Morality is a great way to explain *Nimona* because of the fact that the Institute is trying to portray the role of a hero when in fact they are causing more harm to the city than Ballister! That is a great explanation of how this book could relate to young adolescents because they are still trying to figure out who they are, too.” Another student reported, “I think this book (*El Deafo*) will be good to teach early adolescents to understand that if they feel different and that nobody understands them the way they are, to imagine how a peer feels if he/she in addition have a special need.” Finally, a student responded, “This book (*El*

*Deafo*) is good for young adolescents and teaching them to accept others. In this book Cece is different and is treated differently due to this. I think that this book could show kids in this age range that it's okay to be different and it shows the perspective of the child who is different and how it makes them feel. It can show kids how hurtful it can be when people look at you funny or make you feel strange. It can really help show acceptance to young adolescents.”

Finally, students mentioned different ways their chosen graphic novels could help them with their future classrooms. One student stated, “We can incorporate the differences between friends and how it's okay to make new friends and do different things. Astrid and Nicole (from *Roller Girl*) have been best friends for a while and as they are begging to attend junior high, they see they are not the same. So you can bring up a class discussion on what they would do if their friends do not want to hang out with them anymore because of differences.” Another student reported, “Teachers really do need to take their students' feelings into consideration at this age because they are going through a lot developmentally and learning content is not what they care about most. This book really helps understand how social and emotional issues can impact all areas of a student's life.” Yet another student wrote, “I feel like I can connect with my students better by reading this graphic novel because it points out all that early adolescents go through during junior high. I knew boys would be an issue, but I never considered friendships being lost over different interest. I feel like I can be more sensitive to students' feelings and moods. If I have a child come to class with blue hair, I know that she is most

likely going through a phase.”

Based on my students’ responses, the in-class assignment using graphic novels in an online book club was successful. The students indicated they found the online format more convenient and easy to use. All students participated and all responses were submitted on time. Students did receive a grade for their participation in the book club and the online discussions. Most importantly, all 14 students indicated their willingness to use graphic novels with their future students. This willingness to include a type of text with which the students had not been familiar prior to the book club was very encouraging. Because graphic novels support struggling readers by aiding in comprehension (Cook, 2017), using this type of novel with students should particularly benefit those who read below grade level. Participating in this assignment reshaped the pre-service teachers’ views regarding graphic novels; in particular, they were not aware of their positive impact for struggling readers. If we are to encourage reading among all students, we must be creative in how we encourage a love for it!

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### Appendix

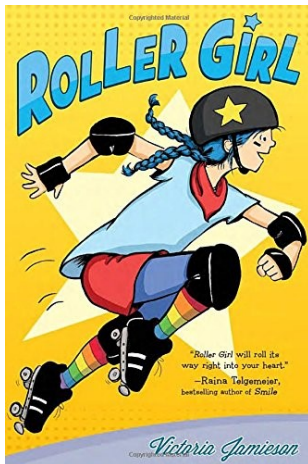
Novel: Roller Girl by Victoria Jamison

Reading schedule:

Chapters 1-5 by June 9th

Chapters 6-10 by June 15

Chapters 11-16 by June 22



### Authors' Biography

Mae A. Lane is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at Sam Houston State University. She has 18 years of experience in public schools as a teacher and administrator. Currently, she teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in preservice teacher preparation. Her research interests include adolescent literacy, disciplinary literacy, and teacher preparation.

Jaime Coyne is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. Her Ph.D. is in Curriculum and Instruction from Texas A&M University. Her research interests include teacher preparation, literacy, pre-teachers' self-efficacy, and curriculum development. She is also the Coordinator for the Post-Baccalaureate Program.

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