Graphic novels and gifted education

Eyes-only edition with annotations and bonus content for reading after the conference

What makes them different from traditional texts?

What kind of problems can they help with?

Where might you start?

Kendra Brown, MSIS
kendra.c.brown@gmail.com
Some starting notes

• I am using the term “graphic novels” to refer to bound volumes featuring continuous or episodic narratives told with integrated, inseparable words and images. Which is to say: I mean collections of comic book issues, novel-length single stories, collections of newspaper strips, nonfiction and memoir books using “comic” format, and anything else that uses words and pictures integrated inseparably together (which distinguishes these works from illustrated books) and has been released in a bound print edition.

• I make reference to gifted and learning-disabled children, but my comments about educational benefits are appropriate to all learners of any ability or challenge; I mean mostly to showcase this medium's ability to appeal to less-typical learning styles and needs.

• I am happy to endorse every graphic novel mentioned in this presentation as a worthwhile book to read, and suitable for teens, but it is up to you to read them and decide whether they are appropriate for your child, family, student, or class. Some of them contain references or simplified depictions of violence, sexuality, torture, and emotionally difficult topics. That said, the Bible adaptations probably have the most intense or problematic content.
Graphic novels in the classroom

- Graphic novels are gaining popularity with educators
- No longer relegated to specialized classes, they are being used in curricula alongside traditional texts
- A fad to keep classrooms trendy, or something more?
Graphic novels for gifted or disabled learners

- Can be easier for some students to read than straight text
  - More varied contrast and colors
  - Visual context helps translate words to concepts
- Unusual formats can be more interesting to an easily-bored or hard-to-engage student
  - Not the same old thing
  - More ways to get involved and excited-- art, colors, script
- Using recent publications can improve class experience
  - Exciting, different, non-traditional
  - Help encourage two-way teaching, learning, active engagement, discussion
  - Better than using texts a parent or instructor already knows inside and out
Incorporating graphic novels in classrooms

- Use graphic or heavily illustrated adaptations of traditional school texts to replace or supplement for many subjects:
  - Literature (Marvel's *Pride and Prejudice*, Classics Illustrated)
  - Civics (graphic Constitution)
  - Fiction (Marvel's *Oz*, Parasol Protectorate series manga adaptation)
- Use graphic textbooks instead of or alongside traditional ones (*Cartoon Guide* series, *Manga Guide* series)
- Graphic works that aren't adaptations can be appropriate for many classes as well:
  - Literature (*Blankets*)
  - Journalism (*The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media*)
  - Biography (*Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth*)
  - Memoir (*Smile*)
  - History (*Maus: a Survivor's Tale*)
  - Social sciences (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*)

The following fifteen slides show sample interior pages from these texts, in the order listed here.
Robin Hood
adaptation from Classics Illustrated series
(available in a modern edition without yellowed pulp paper)
And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of each kind, cattle and creeping things and wild beasts of each kind." And so it was. And God made wild beasts of each kind and cattle of every kind, and all creeping things on the ground of each kind, and God saw that it was good.

And God said, "Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, over the cattle, and over the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls upon the earth."

And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.

And God blessed them, and God said to them... Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and master it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every beast that crawls upon the earth.

And God said... Behold, I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of all the earth and every tree that has fruit-bearing seed, yours they shall be for food.
Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the livestock, and all the creatures that creep along the ground.'

God blessed them, saying, 'Breed and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every creature that moves on the ground.'

And God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning. The sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and on the seventh day, God rested from all the work that He had done.
The United States Constitution: A Round Table Comic Graphic Adaptation
Oz is only a humble wizard, though.

That's the safest kind of wizard to have.

Oz can do some good tricks, humble or no humble.

He shall amuse us with his tricks tomorrow. I've sent messengers to summon all of Dorothy's old friends to give her welcome. They ought to arrive very soon now.

The dinner was no sooner finished than in rushed Dorothy's old friends.
Soulless manga adaptation (Parasol Protectorate series of steampunk vampire books)
CHAPTER 17

MAGNETIC FIELDS

Several thousand years ago, the Greeks discovered that certain metallic rocks from the district of Magnesia in Asia Minor would attract iron, and attract or repel similar rocks. Hence the name "magnet."

Good thing they weren't from Amnesia. Yeah, we'd have had to forget all about 'em...

Magnesia
3. A Cell Is the Location of Many Chemical Reactions

I really studied a lot today! It looks like I'm one step closer to mastering the secrets of biochemistry!

I've learned about the metabolic processes that occur in cells, but I haven't learned anything about biochemistry itself!

What gives?

But you have studied biochemistry!

All of the processes you learned about are actually biochemical phenomena!

I'll prove it to you!

The Manga Guide to Biochemistry

Chapter 1

BIOCHEMISTRY OF PROTEIN SYNTHESIS

What do you think happens when proteins are synthesized?

Amino acids are joined together, then folded to create a protein.

A protein is actually formed by many small molecules called amino acids joining together.

There are 20 common types of amino acids used to create proteins.

These 20 types can be combined in different numbers and orders to create various types of proteins.

Protein synthesis is carried out by ribosomes, which float in the cytoplasm or are stuck to the endoplasmic reticulum.

Although they look like little grains of rice, if we zoom in we can see that they have a strange shape.

Actually, if we simplify it a bit, a ribosome looks a lot like a snowman.
Inevitably, a storm would strike and do a number on our ship.

CRUSH the bow,

SHATTER the poop deck,

FLING one bean-stuffed pirate to his fate,

And FINALLY leave our bed coverings in a state of disarray.

Then we'd gather those crumpled blankets, salvage any remaining crewmates, and wind a nest about us.

The storm would persist all night with waves sloshing the boat and rain gushing down overhead.

But in that little pathetic clump of blankets, there was comfort.

OoSSHHH! WHHHHHhhhhhh!
Objectivity emerges as a selling point in American journalism...

When the price of a newspaper drops to a penny.

But in 1833, the New York Sun tries a new business model: slash the price to sell on the street to immigrants and workers, multiply the readership — then deliver that readership to eager advertisers, who make the papers profitable.

The content changes, too: more local politics, more crime, more drama, more scoops. News is a commodity like bread. **Freshness matters, inaccuracy — like this balloon hoax, penned by Edgar Allan Poe — doesn't.**

As always, technology facilitates the revolution. New rotary presses keep adding capacity, flooding the streets with cheap newsprint.

This is when modern journalism begins.
Logicomix
SURE. FIXING YOUR OVERRUN BITE WAS THE WHOLE POINT TO BEGIN WITH.

BUT... BUT I'M GONNA LOOK LIKE A NERD WITH HEADGEAR ON!

YOU ONLY NEED TO WEAR IT AT NIGHT!

JAMIE, ARE YOU READY WITH THAT?

WE'RE MAKING A MOLD OF YOUR MOUTH. OPEN UP... THIS MIGHT FEEL A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE...

SHOVE!
Maus: A Survivor's Tale

I ran to find Mandelbaum.

Vladek??!

You look like a general!

Hah! Not quite. But I’ve been lucky, and I didn’t forget you...

Look—I got you your own spoon.

A spoon! Thank you, Vladek. Thank you.

And here’s a belt—not just string—a real belt!

Oh my God!

And one more thing: a pair of wooden shoes that will fit you!

Gasp

My God, my God, my God... it’s a miracle, Vladek.

God sent shoes through you.

He was so happy; he was crying... and I started also crying with him.

He was so happy with this... and the kapo knew Mandelbaum was my friend so he left him also alone.

How long could I keep him? But a few days later, the Germans chose him to take away to work...

Nobody could help this. So, it was finished with Mandelbaum. I never saw him more again.
Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood

In 1979 a revolution took place. It was later called "the Islamic Revolution."

Then came 1980: the year it became obligatory to wear the veil at school.

We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to.

"It's too hot out!" Execution in the name of freedom.

"Give me my veil back!"

"You'll have to lick my feet!"

"Oooh, I'm the monster of darkness."
Applications in less formal learning

• Less traditional medium allows authors to tackle subjects under-represented in other media

• Words and pictures together can express concepts (including emotional or internal experience) in ways that can be easier to understand

• Superhero genre often tackles difficult aspects of giftedness (*beyond* "With great power comes great responsibility")

• Teen hero stories approach issues like socializing, being the only gifted kid at school, being the new kid at all-gifted school
Sometimes, graphic novels telling stories about teens go overboard on “teen experience” aspects of the story, showing an exaggerated (and less helpful) version of social interactions. Also, as with any medium, having conversations about representation is important: comics are notoriously imbalanced in terms of gender representation (and depiction), among other things, and a scene like this can be a good jumping-off point to talk about those issues.
Peanuts can be a good source for talking about social difficulty as well as interacting with peers gifted in different ways--compare real-life experiences to Charlie Brown (trouble making friends, bad at sports, wants to be included), Linus (articulate and insightful, but can be inattentive to emotions, and needs blanket), Lucy (socially apt but academically disinterested), Schroeder (musically talented but conversationally incapable).
Superman: Secret Identity does a great job of addressing the social outcast feelings of giftedness. It also shows four different important stages of life and how gifts impact all of them in some negative but mostly positive ways (although it's not a perfect analogy for real life, since Kent's gifts get him hunted and recruited by government agents). Also, it's a great comic, and a great place to “break into” reading about superheroes, as it's a standalone story in four issues that don't require any prior knowledge of continuity (all you need to know is that Clark Kent is Superman's alter ego, and Lois Lane is a Superman love interest).
Secret Identity also addresses the loneliness and separation that comes from having a gift and not being sure how to (safely) share it or let it show.
Fullmetal Alchemist deals with some of the internal experience of being a prodigy interacting with less skilled adults, and of the deep loneliness that can come with that (although some of the loneliness comes from being an orphan, which leads to part of the story being about discovering family outside of birth parents). FMA is a right-to-left manga available in translation; the whole story is very long (around 50 small volumes). Also, it has two anime adaptations (the more recent one, called Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, is more faithful to the manga's themes and story).
This page from *Teen Titans: A Kid's Game* shows (so to speak) speedster Bart deciding that he needs to step up his game and let his brain shine so his teammates will stop thinking he's a slacker who only plays dumb games and can't get organized; unfortunately, they aren't as impressed when his voracious high-speed eidetic reading leaves them completely forgotten in the midst of a crisis.
Most Importantly

- *Never* tell kids some kind of book "doesn't count," especially if they like it.
- There is no quicker way to turn a kid off reading, or sharing with you.
- Encourage everyone to share insights from any media that inspires them!
The strong visual metaphors and mature vocabulary in *Calvin and Hobbes* make it a great learning and discussing tool for opening up communication about challenges.
The *X-Men: First Class* comic is more insightful than the film of the same name, and concerns the first students of the formal Xavier Academy for Gifted Youth. One of the things shown in the comic that sets the Academy apart is Xavier's ability to teach the students as individuals, adapting strategies to play to strengths and weaknesses. In this scene, he allows a restless student to skip class, and then (next page) uses telepathy to convey the lesson in a way tailored to the student. He also maintains the impression for the other students that this behavior is not appropriate, for the other students (who benefit better from the more traditional classroom) while privately explicitly encouraging Worthington to exercise his energy.
"It's not like anyone can really ditch glass with Professor Xavier."

I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean disrespect. It's just sometimes I feel if I don't get up in the sky that you will explode.

Yes, yes.

Of course you do, perhaps that is what every cage bird feels as well.

Sure...

Yet I believe that our studies are absolutely necessary. Allow me to shape your imagination for a moment.

Suppose mutants lived yourself existed four thousand years ago.

Fridah's Byron, just one, imagine how incredible just one flying man would have seemed. How much he would have been talked about, speculated on.
Umbrella Academy is the story of superheroes who re-gather as adults for the funeral of their unsympathetic foster-father and have to get over their past traumas (shared and otherwise) in order to save the world. The narrative focuses on their interactions and emotions, but can be hard to follow as the backstory is not revealed in the way it might be in other stories (or, sometimes, at all). I include this page for its familiarity to any student who has suffered the company of an adult with seemingly alien values.

During my live presentation, I also mentioned the graphic novel Skim by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, which is a deeply emotional story about teen depression, suicide (not of the main character) and self-discovery; like Umbrella Academy, I would recommend it for more advanced readers, as the story is told with a lot of implication through synthesis of words and pictures.
A parent-teacher meeting from *Teen Titans: A Kid's Game*
Poor familial communication leads to misunderstanding of gifts in *Teen Titans: A Kid's Game*.
Marvel's *Runaways* series is about, among other things, a group of teens discovering their gifts without the support of their parents. On this and the next page, Molly (who is not quite twelve) demonstrates the importance of parents being fully attentive to communication attempts, and not projecting the parent's experience onto the child's words.
What are you doing here?

What... what did you do to her?

Nothing! Why, what happened?

Oh, Jesus.

This is what I was trying to tell you...

...something's wrong with my body.
Bibliography

Telgemeier, R. (2010). Smile. GRAPHIX.

If you're itching to get started, every book I've referenced in this presentation is available as a single volume from your favorite bookseller using the titles shown on this page. Some are the first collected edition installment of a longer run, others stand alone. (The Oz page I used is not from the volume listed here, but the others all are.)
This is a brief selection of articles from my research on graphic novels and comic books in libraries (public, school, and higher academic) which might help a teacher or family get started on their own teaching collection. Many of these are ultimately recommendation lists, but some are or include serious research and discussion of the hows and whys of graphic novels, and not just the what and which.

If you're interested in graphic novels and libraries, more of my writing on the subject is available at http://www.albany.edu/~kb541254/comics.html; most of my papers are about library technical services and may be of less interest to non-librarians, but my paper about the growth of graphic novel collections in academic (college and university) libraries may be of historical interest to fellow enthusiasts.