Introduction

Pictures can tell a story. In *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger makes this case, while also suggesting that images are more precise than literature in providing an authentic account of the human condition. With this in mind, many educators have begun focusing on the importance of visual literacy: the manner in which we perceive, interpret, and evaluate images. As a result, graphic novels have gained popularity (and much critical attention) in the secondary classroom. Researchers contend that graphic novels provide a useful relationship between print and visual literacy.

The following information is a companion to my roundtable presentation which focuses on a specific sub-genre of the graphic novel: the baseball graphic novel. After all, baseball features unique visual qualities, in terms of time, place, and action. First, the presentation will provide a practical definition of visual literacy and a review of current scholarship on graphic novels and their association with visual literacy. Then, several baseball graphic novels will be analyzed for the manner in which they present the game's action, socio-economic conditions, and history.

Visual Literacy: Its Importance

Visual literacy, as an academic pursuit, has gained considerable attention over the past decade, particularly in the fields of education and literacy. Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (2008) begin their book *Teaching Visual Literacy* by asserting that visual literacy is important because in the 21st century, students must comprehend pictures as they do written texts. Peter Felten (2008) echoes this belief, stating, “Images no longer exist primarily to entertain and illustrate. Rather, they are becoming central to communication” (p. 60). Even the NCTE and IRA (1996) have adopted a joint position on visual literacy, stating, “Teaching students how to interpret and create visual texts...is another essential component of the English language arts curriculum (p.5).

This emphasis on visual literacy has led the Association of College and Research Libraries (2011) to propose a set of standards on the subject for post-secondary education. Standard Three reads: “The visually literate student interprets and analyzes the meanings of images and visual media.” Included are further outcomes, that the students...“explore representations of gender, ethnicity, and other cultural or social identifiers in images.”

At the secondary level, similar standards are being suggested by the Core Curriculum Initiative and the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning Corporation.
Graphic Novels: Their Application

In his introduction to Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels, James Bucky Carter (2007) states that literacy is no longer confined to words on a page, but any form of text that a literate person can read. He suggests that "visual literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy have become intertwined." (p.12) This is an important point when it comes to the baseball graphic novel, in particular: baseball has its own culture, with language and standards of behavior all its own.

Gretchen Schwartz argues that graphic novels “offer value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the impact of visuals...they represent alternative views of culture, history, and human life in general in accessible ways” (Schwarz 2011, p.262).

But the graphic novel is also applicable in terms of its usefulness in acting as a stepping stone to literacy, especially for struggling male readers. Carter’s book suggests ways that graphic novels can be tied to other pieces/forms of literature. This approach makes sense, considering that studies suggest that graphic novels are one of the few media able to hold the interest of young male readers (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Indeed, what we want, as Donelson and Nilsen (2005) state, are boys who “develop the kind of sensitivity they need to cope with the world” (p.45). While class-assigned texts and the teaching strategies are designed to do this, the development of this “sensitivity” does not have to stop there. Brozo (2002) suggests, “The top priority for all teachers and adults is to help boys find entry points into literacy” (p.8). Graphic novels, as a whole, can function as such an entry point; the baseball graphic does so in a highly specialized way.

The Baseball Graphic Novel: Relevant for Middle and High School Readers

In “Literacy for the Information Age” (1997), Renee Hobbs makes the following assertions about communication:

1. All messages are constructions;
2. Messages are representations of social reality;
3. Individuals negotiate meaning by interacting with messages;
4. Messages have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes;
5. Each form of communication has unique characteristics (p. 9).

The visual messages we find in a baseball graphic novel “hit” on each of these, particularly #4. Why? Because the sport has a history that moves in and out of political and social spectrums. The graphic novels 21: The Story of Roberto Clemente and Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow provide excellent examples of this.

Baseball graphic novels are not just specialized forms of "sequential art." They are stories that communicate messages through images—images that are often unique to baseball. After all, the game itself has its own peculiar visual rhetoric: the scoreboard, the mound, the outfield fence, the foul pole, and most importantly, the ball itself. A baseball can easily be identified by anyone who knows its primary feature: red stitching in a near figure-eight shape. No matter if the drawing of a baseball is realistic….
or cartoonish. A reader experienced with the game will pick up on the stitching and know it is a baseball.

In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), Scott McCloud argues that comics are as important as literature and other forms of art, and he presents a number of features of comics to make this point. Three of these features are particularly applicable to the baseball graphic novel: Icons and symbols, closure, and time and space.

For McCloud an “icon” is any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea. So the baseballs displayed above are not actually baseballs; they are visual representations of baseballs. This is important, because baseball’s history is one in which “icons” are part of its team’s logos. So are bats and gloves. The game is already pointing out that the icons of the game are important to it.

Closure occurs when the readers must “observe the parts but perceive the whole” (p.63). The reader works to see what is *not* depicted in a panel. The ability to do so in a baseball graphic novel is often based on one’s experience and knowledge of the game, its subtleties and nuances: being able to “read” a box score, for instance, in *Hutch* by Mike Shannon and Scott Hanning or *Hit by Pitch* by Molly Lawless. According the McCloud, the artist and the reader engage in a “dance of the seen and unseen” (p.92). This is no truer than in the baseball graphic novel.

The terms *time* and *space* refer to the way an artist must depict time, frame by frame, and how the reader must make inferences about the “space” between panels. McCloud states, “The panel (a unit of measurement in a graphic novel) acts as a sort of general indicator that space and time are being divided (p. 99). When baseball’s motion is depicted in a graphic novel—base stealing, hitting, running, catching—the reader is again using prior experience to “fill in” the gaps of time. For instance, action sequences may show a ball-in-hand, followed by a ball in flight, followed by a tag at third base. A reader who has watched or played baseball will be able to interpret the use of images in such a sequence.

If students need to “examine the relationships of images to each other and use related images to form interpretation” (ACRL, 2011), then they are applying a knowledge of the three facets McCloud describes. Baseball is not an activity that is any more or less “visual” than others; but interpreting such visuals in a graphic novel requires the reader to be able to read the visual rhetoric of the sport itself—its field, players, fans, environment, and culture.

**Graphic novels suitable for inclusion in secondary ELA instruction:**

- *Hutch* by Mike Shannon and Scott Hanning
- *Satchel Paige: Striking Out Jim Crow* by James Sturm and Rich Tommaso
- *The Golem's Mighty Swing* by James Sturm
- *Hit by Pitch* by Molly Lawless
- *21: The Story of Roberto Clemente* by Wilfred Santiago
References


