

Teaching Multimodal Literacy Through Reading and Writing Graphic Novels

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Abstract

Scholarship suggests that writing teachers and instructors looking to integrate multimodal composition into their secondary or post-secondary classrooms should consider graphic novels as a mentor text for multimodal literacy. To help those pedagogues unfamiliar with graphic novels, we offer three titles—*The Photographer*, *Operation Ajax*, and *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow*—students have responded positively to. Herein we offer a summary for each text, a discussion of their uses to teach multimodal literacy, a range of multimodal assignments to pair with each text, and a variety of assessment methods.

Introduction

The last two decades have seen a surge in scholarship supporting the use of graphic novels in the English classroom (for example, see Bakis, 2012; Cary, 2004; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Miller, 2015; and Syma & Weiner, 2013). The scope of how graphic novels are discussed is impressive. For instance, there are literary scholars examining how complex literary themes, sophisticated metaphors, dynamic characterization, and commentary on social, cultural, and historical issues can be found in a wide array of graphic novels (e.g., Chute, 2008; Meskin, 2009). Additionally, there are pedagogues who suggest graphic narratives are an excellent gateway literacy—that is, an avenue for reluctant readers to engage with reading (Jobe & Sakari, 1999; Weiner, 2010). More recently, compositionists and rhetoricians have become increasingly interested in the multimodality of comics; most comics, particularly mainstream comics, consistently make use of images juxtaposed with text (usually in the form of speech balloons, captions, or sound effects). Jacobs (2014) argues that print comics are sites of complex multimodality at work, as comics are “comprised not only of linguistic elements, but also some combination of visual audio (as represented visually), gestural, and spatial elements” (para. 4). He goes on to note readers of comics are simultaneously making meaning from a variety of elements, ranging from words to layout to panel composition to body language.

As such, and for a variety of reasons, educators are often looking for recommendations of graphic novel titles to integrate into their respective classrooms. We, for example, use graphic novels at the post-secondary level in numerous ways and are constantly on the lookout for useful comics and graphic novels (both as teachers and as readers). As a teacher educator Mike uses comics with pre-service English language arts (ELA) teachers in an effort to help them plan and implement their own literacy instruction, specifically toward fostering multimodal analysis and composition. Jeff, a comic and digital rhetoric scholar, teaches entire courses on comics and utilizes comics and graphic novels to help students explore and develop multimodal and digital literacy skills. While many educators are well versed in the scholarship, others incorporate comics

and graphic novels because they and/or their students enjoy and find value in them. Additionally, interest in comics in the classroom continues to increase as a result of word of mouth and the popularity of comics. Regardless of the reason, many educators find benefit in title suggestions. Thankfully, there are several stalwart annotated bibliographies focused on graphic novels appropriate for classroom adaptation. For instance, since 2007 ALA has published a detailed list of graphic novels appropriate for teenagers, offering titles in multiple genres. Similarly, Diamond Comics—the North American distributor of comic books—has published a magazine entitled *The Diamond Bookshelf* that regularly features and recommends a diverse range of graphic novels for educators; additionally, they offer a host of recommendations on their website and even offer a monthly newsletter intended to keep educators abreast of news in graphic novels. And, though more quickly obsolete, there are a range of books offering detailed title recommendations for librarians and educators of graphic novels appropriate for different ages and settings (see Goldsmith, 2010; Gravett, 2005, among others). All of these publications celebrate the diversity of graphic novels and work hard to address titles appropriate for multiple audiences and ages.

Though useful, many of these recommendation lists focus on graphic novels as literature; that is, these publications tend to be more interested in content, theme, characterization, and so forth as opposed to form. While this is indeed helpful—and understanding graphic novels as literature is valuable for educators and scholars alike—it leaves out recommendations for instructors interested in utilizing graphic novels as multimodal sponsors. While the number of texts for teachers continues to rise (e.g., Bakis, 2012; Carter, 2007; Monnin, 2010; Tabachnick, 2009), they are comparatively fewer than those dedicated to discussing content and comics as a form (e.g., Cohn, 2013; McCloud, 1994; Groensteen, 2007; Postema, 2013; Sousanis, 2015). Given the inherent multimodality of comics, there may be an unstated assumption that any graphic novel is appropriate for teaching multimodality. However, in our experience, there are certain graphic novels that work especially well for composition classrooms striving to introduce multimodality to secondary or post-secondary writing students. As such, this article offers three graphic novels—*The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (Guibert, 2009), *Operation AJAX* (Burwen & de Seve, 2013), and *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow* (Fies, 2012)—that are appropriate for writing teachers and instructors at both the secondary and post-secondary level. These three texts utilize multimodality in engaging, unique, challenging, and ultimately rewarding ways, as they prepare students to not only write graphic texts, but also other multimodal compositions such as photo-essays, multimedia presentations, and scrapbooks. In other words, these comics (as well as comics as a medium) hold much utility as mentor texts, where students develop the (transferable) skills and language to read, analyze, and discuss authors' rhetorical and modal choices prior to using those experiences to drive their own multimodal compositions, whether those be comics or a multitude of other text types. For us, using comics as mentor texts offers far more than simply fostering comic composition skills. Those skills gained from studying comics as multimodal texts offer students transferrable skills for composing an array of multimodal texts. Our discussion (1) summarizes each text, (2) notes why it is a practical mentor text for multimodal literacy sponsorship, and (3) offers suggestions for multimodal composition assignments that pair well with and draw from the titles we recommend. We pay detailed attention to these comics as mentor texts, as the learning that occurs as a result is vital to critical thinking, problem solving, and the composing process. Following this, we offer suggestions for assessing multimodal compositions, a vital component of any composition instruction.

Literature Review

Scholars and pedagogues are increasingly recognizing that multimodal literacy is an issue that should be addressed in writing classrooms; part of this urgency stems from the oft-cited National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) position on 21st century literacies. Here, NCTE (2011) argues that proficient 21st century readers and writers should be able to “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media text” (para. 1). As such, writing instructors at both the secondary and post-secondary levels are beginning to integrate explicit multimodal writing instruction in their curriculum. For instance, Frost, Myatt, and Smith (2009) find value in assigning hybrid essays (images used in alphabetic essays) because they recognize that on a daily basis, students utilize myriad “semiotic resources” in their private and public communications; the authors also find that the hybrid essay helps individuals move past privileging the printed/written word while simultaneously helping students learn a variety of communicative modes. Other pedagogues have advocated using websites (e.g. Kirchoff & Cook, 2016 and Rankins-Robertson, Bouelle, Bouelle, & Fisher, 2014), podcasts (e.g. Jones, 2010 and Smythe & Neufeld, 2010), blogs (e.g. Doering, Beach, & O’Brien, 2007 and Clark, 2010), videos (e.g. Lovett et al., 2010 and Spires et al., 2010), and games (e.g. Colby & Colby, 2008 and Robison, 2008). More detailed overviews of integrating multimodal composition projects in writing courses can be found in edited collections devoted to that very subject, such as *Multimodal Composition* (2007), *Reading and Writing New Media* (2010), and *Teaching the New Writing* (2009).

One such way to incorporate multimodality in classrooms is through the use of comics and graphic novels. Indeed, a number of scholars have argued for the inclusion of graphic novels in ELA and college literacy instruction for the myriad benefits that accompany them (Bakis, 2012; Carter, 2007; Connors, 2015; Fisher & Frey, 2011; Hall, 2011; Smetana, 2010). Smetana (2010) notes the format of graphic novels (i.e., the weaving together of images and text) can help readers focus on vital information to make meaning from the text. Not only do graphic novels assist students in developing deeper understandings of and appreciations for literature and literary elements (Moeller, 2011; Schwarz, 2002), but they can also promote the development of transferable literacy skills that can be applied to other text types (Jacobs, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008). This is, in part, because graphic novels require readers to make meaning from a variety of types and modes of information, such as text, image, color, paneling, and so forth (Carrier, 2000; Takayhoshi & Selfe, 2007). The ability to analyze and utilize a variety of modes of communication allows students to develop a more nuanced and layered understanding of the rhetorical situation, including a variety of ways to effectively communicate with an audience. As such, the skills gained from consuming and analyzing graphic novels (as mentor texts) are applicable to monomodal (e.g., traditional writing) and other multimodal composition types alike. Moreover, graphic novels have been found to influence students’ perception of writing and of the impact of multimodal composition on their writing abilities. Kirchoff & Cook (2016), for example, found that not only did students believe that multimodal composition positively influenced their writing, but they also demonstrated a better understanding of the roles audience and design played in their own composition processes. That said, Wysocki (2003) offers a reminder that teachers must assist students in understanding the ways in which meaning is created based on authorial choices in visual design and arrangement. In other words, explicit instruction and modeling are vital.

Several scholars (e.g., Fisher & Frey, 2014; Hammond, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Schwarz, 2002) discuss comics and graphic novels as sophisticated sites and sponsors of multiple literacies, requiring readers to create meaning from a variety of modalities and from the intersection of those modes. Interacting with this complexity and sophistication, as Versaci (2001) argues, requires

readers to be active participants. Furthermore, graphic novels, as Serafini (2014) states, can foster development of a metalanguage for discussing and analyzing multiple modes of communication. Others (e.g., Connors, 2012; Pantaleo, 2014) argue that graphic novels can promote more complex thinking about and understandings of text and the visual as modes of communication. This development of both text and visual analysis, including the meaning created between the two, are vital components of multimodal literacy. In other words, to conduct multimodal analysis, students must engage in and develop the skills for textual analysis and visual analysis, both of which can be fostered through graphic novels.

Graphic novels have also been discussed as effective sponsors of students' multimodal composition. Wierszewski (2014) argues creating comics can (1) help students to understand the conventions of multimodal texts are unique and contextually tied, and (2) empower students to be creative and to employ agency in their literacy practices. Kennedy, Thomsen, and Trabold (2015) share, "comics provide a rich avenue for students to deliberate with more sophistication the rhetorical moves they employ in their own writing" (p. 192). Connors (2012) finds students were able to develop and use both linguistic and visual design to actively analyze graphic novels, skills that can then be applied to their own compositions. Similarly, additional research (Pantaleo, 2014) suggests graphic novels can foster higher order thinking. For these literacy benefits to be applied to multimodal composing, however, it is important to provide students opportunities to read comics "critically with an understanding of how their design conventions contribute to their meaning and persuasiveness" (Wierszewski, 2014, para. 36). Implementing graphic novels in the classroom, for both consumption and composition, can foster multimodal literacy and help bridge the divide that often exists between the literacy practices students use in school and those they engage in outside of schools (i.e., those that make up our 21st century world). It is here, in this need to reconceive ELA and literacy instruction (including the texts and composition methods in which we ask students to engage) that we ground our use of graphic novels to promote and foster multimodal literacy in students.

Graphic Novels and Multimodal Composition

The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders

The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders is a powerful collaboration between graphic novelist Emmanuel Guibert and photographer Didier Lefèvre. As the title suggests, this work shares the story of Lefèvre's experience during a 1986 Doctors Without Borders mission in North Afghanistan. Traveling with a small group of doctors and nurses, Lefèvre and friends find themselves roving the very land where a war between the Soviet Union and the Afghan Mujahideen is taking place. The story is an interesting combination of autobiography, documentation of the work Doctors Without Borders conducts, examination of war and the far-reaching impact that wars have, and a profile of Afghanistan during the mid-1980s. This text is more than a portrait of one individual—it is a collage of humanity. The tone ranges from sweet to sorrowful to noble—and just about everything in between. Arranged in three books, the first two focus on Lefèvre's time with Doctors Without Borders, while the third details Lefèvre's decision to leave the mission early and traverse North Afghanistan by himself.

Rationale of The Photographer as mentor text. The Photographer is a worthy multimodal mentor text for teachers considering the integration of multimodal composition projects in their

classes. The graphic novel is unique in that roughly half of the story is told through actual photos Lefèvre took during his experience with Doctors Without Borders; Guibert’s artwork, dialogue, and captions fill in the gaps, often serving as a voice for Lefèvre’s recollections. Guibert purposefully uses the *ligne claire* (clear line) style made popular by Herge’s *TinTin*. Deceptively simple, Guibert’s illustrations aim to take a back seat to Lefèvre’s photos, which allows the photographs to be the principal force behind the narrative. This in itself allows students the possibility for some rich multimodal analysis: how do the photographs and the illustrations work together? How do the photographs and illustrations create a different point of view/tone, and how does this impact the reader? How does the transition from photograph to illustration occur, and how do they influence your reading? What might be done to improve the transitions? These are worthwhile questions to pose to students as burgeoning multimodal composers themselves, as it forces them to consider how to move between different modes and styles of communication.

Given the narrative power of the photographs, students can focus much of their visual analysis on the photos themselves, which is an excellent way for students new to multimodal composition to focus their attention and develop the skills requisite for analyzing mentor images and subsequently composing their own. As students are no doubt familiar with the medium of photography—that is, while they may not necessarily be adept at analyzing photographs, students are generally comfortable taking pictures—this gives students a level of familiarity with the text-type they are being asked to analyze. Interestingly, all the photographs are in black and white, so while color is not necessarily a point of analysis for students, use of light, perspective, angle, focus, and shot-choice are possible ways to focus discussion and should be part of the conversation during student analysis.

What makes this text even more interesting—and engaging for teaching multimodal composition—is that several of Lefèvre’s images are marked with a red “x.” These photographs are images Lefèvre himself was particularly pleased with and ones he thought suitable for publication for promoting Doctors Without Borders. This helps teach multimodal composition in two very key ways. First, students can engage in a discussion about why those images were chosen, which usually leads to some intense visual analysis; we encourage our students to consider and subsequently rationalize whether other images would have been stronger selections for publication. Perhaps more meaningfully, though, is Lefèvre’s markings are evidence to students that certain choices have to be made regarding which images to include in a publication; put differently, Lefèvre did not simply use every image he took, but rather he had to make difficult choices regarding which pictures were the most appropriate for his purpose, context, and audience. Thus, it reinforces the idea that students should be making, taking, or finding multiple images and closely analyzing their creations to determine the best shots for their rhetorical purpose, context, and audience. We highlight this when it comes time to the creation of their multimodal compositions; that is, we use *The Photographer* to help show students the composition of these projects is a process—often a time-consuming one—and students will ultimately undergo several revisions, often taking/finding more images than they need in an effort to create the most rhetorically effective document.

Assignment: the photo essay. One multimodal composition assignment that pairs well with *The Photographer* is the photo-essay. Reilly and Goen (2015) observe that the photo-essay is an excellent way to teach students how visuals can work together to create meaning, and through this essay, students are forced to thoughtfully consider the sequencing of images in order to provide their audience the most effective reading experience. Additionally, the authors

appreciate that photo-essays encourage students to think about the organization of images, the diversity of images, and the clarity of their images; they find these skills are easily visualized in a photo-essay, but are valuable skills to translate to more traditional essays as well. Frey (2003) adds that photo-essays asking students to pair image with text often help students choose their (select) words more carefully in order to best “enhance” the photographs they’ve decided to use. These pedagogues, then, are primarily interested in how the photo-essay impacts traditional alphabetic text.

While we value the ways photo-essays can help students develop skills that can improve their traditional essay writing, we want to note photo-essays also help students improve multimodal and visual literacy skills. Photographs are, it could be argued, a multimodal text in and of themselves—regardless of whether the written word is present. This is an extension of Kress’s (2010) belief that all texts are multimodal *in design*, as multimodality simply refers to the use of different modes of communication; thus, while “image” (broadly conceived) is a mode of communication, so too is color, gesture, facial expression, movement, layout, and so forth. As photographs *capture* all of these “modes,” photographs themselves become a rich site of multimodality. Thus, asking students to write a photo-essay is really a layered exercise in multimodality: first, students need to analyze the multiple modes present in one photograph to choose the most rhetorically effective one. These skills are useful to not only multimodal analysis, but also visual analysis. Then, students are asked to use a different mode (text) to enhance their photograph; specifically, the text can be used to reflect, analyze, or discuss what is seen in the photograph.

Our photo essay asks students to advocate for a certain program, policy, or event; we choose this broad theme because, as we discuss with students, one goal of *The Photographer* is to *advocate* for the work that Doctors Without Borders conducts. Thus, this theme helps better parallel what we have read and discussed in class. Students are instructed to find or take ten to twelve photos and write a 50-75 word caption for each photo that clarifies, extends, or explains the image. We stress that like Lefèvre, they will need to take or find more images than they plan on using; the goal is not to use the first ten images they find, but rather the ten best images suited to their specific rhetorical situation.

We first spend some in-class time going over considerations for taking photos. For college classrooms, we suggest using an article such as Harrison’s (2003) “Understanding How Still Images Make Meaning” while for high school classrooms (and even the college classroom), we have found Serafini’s (n.d.) “Photography Analysis Guide” to be eminently useful. These texts not only give students language to analyze photos—obviously an important part of this unit—but they also help students consider what is needed to take a rhetorically impactful photograph. Here, we are trying to get students out of a “point and shoot” mentality and into a frame of mind that encourages careful planning. Through their reading of *The Photographer*, students use and further develop these new skills as they analyze Lefèvre’s photographs.

However, while we ultimately want students to be active creators of content by focusing on taking many of their own photographs, we also acknowledge the value in supplanting their work with existing images they have found through careful research. To that end, we think it is imperative to have conversations regarding copyright and fair use. A lot of students think it is acceptable to peruse Google Images, find photos appropriate for their project, and cite them as they would another source. Most students are not aware that many photos are protected by copyright laws and oftentimes are not subject to fair use laws. Thus, we show students how to conduct fair use searches using Google Images and Creative Commons, as well as showing them

sources such as Wikimedia Commons and PhotoBucket. We still have conversations about how to cite these works, as citing their research is important, but this dialogue should be supplanted by discussions surrounding copyright, fair use, and intellectual theft.

In sum, we have found the photo-essay to be an assignment that helps foster visual and multimodal literacy; given students' familiarity with photographs, they tend to be more comfortable closely analyzing this text-type. Moreover, we appreciate the ease with which this text demonstrates the need for multimodal composition projects to undergo revision; oftentimes, due to the time-consuming nature of multimodal text creation, students feel they only have time to produce one draft. However, by showing them the number of photos Lefèvre takes—and comparatively, how few were used by Doctors Without Borders—we can better articulate the need for students to revise their work as they begin to fine-tune their understanding of audience, purpose, and context.

Operation Ajax

Introduced as an iPad application in 2010, Burwen and De Seve's (2011) *Operation Ajax: How the CIA Topped Democracy in Iran* is a digital comic designed to provide readers with an interactive multimodal experience. The text is based on a 2007 investigative journalism report of U.S. involvement in the 1953 overthrowing of Iranian democracy to reinstate a monarchy, and the connections to the oil industry. As a result, the story has use as both a narrative and an interpretation of a historical happening. What also makes the text unique is in the way it bridges the traditional comic format with audio, motion, and archived primary documents. For example, *Operation Ajax* borrows heavily from video game design (e.g., using music to create mood and tension throughout the story) to create an immersive experience for readers. This creates an experience akin to playing a game or to film, but because it is a graphic novel at heart, readers have the opportunity to linger with specific panels or images. Additionally, readers can access dossiers to learn more about characters and historical connections. These non-traditional affordances can be used to engage students in active and dynamic textual and narrative analysis.

Rationale of Operation Ajax as mentor text. As Serafini (2014) points out, we must find ways to engage students with and to foster communication using a variety of modalities. While many pedagogues have used print graphic novels to accomplish this—and we advocate this as well—digital graphic novels are also a possibility. Digital graphic novels create a unique opportunity for readers to experience not only text and image, but also movement, sound, and interactivity.

Through *Operation Ajax*, students can develop the skills necessary to make meaning from and across layered modal experiences (Hassett & Schieble, 2007). Using digital comics, and *Operation Ajax* specifically, offers a number of literacy benefits to readers. For example, as Goodbrey (2013) argues, *Operation Ajax* uses animation as a scaffold for reading and understanding movement. Likewise, it establishes pacing for readers, which may assist those less familiar with the comic format or with multimodal texts in general. Because students can linger with individual images and scenes and make their own choices about the speed at which to proceed, the process can be an individual experience for each reader. It is true that graphic novels in general allow readers to linger and thus provides them choice in pacing, but *Operation Ajax* scaffolds pacing in additional and important ways. For example, readers can focus on one scene (or panel) at a time before even seeing subsequent narrative information. In traditional graphic novels, readers can take in the page as a whole before and between focusing on individual panels.

Operation Ajax, because it is structured more like a game or film, focuses readers on one instance at a time and allows them the time necessary to fully interact with and make meaning from the scene before progressing to new information. This additional pacing can help scaffold those new to the format and focus those more experienced.

Aside from the benefits of receiving information from multiple modes, *Operation Ajax* allows students to move from narrative to documentation and background/contextual information in their own ways and in their own time. Additionally, this scaffolding puts readers in control by requiring them to be active participants. Yet another benefit of this digital text is that it includes supplemental documents, in the form of character dossiers and digitally-created primary documents. This is an important resource for all readers, but it can guide those unfamiliar with the historical background and participants. Unlike many other forms of texts, *Operation Ajax* has built in contextual information for supporting and bridging existing gaps in background knowledge or schema. These concepts impact engagement and reading comprehension. Furthermore, the inclusion of the dossiers supports students' information literacy. Ultimately, the format of the text itself benefits readers by creating opportunities to derive meaning from image, text, movement, audio, and the layered combinations of those modes (see, for example, Dittmar, 2012; Goobrey, 2013). We find it useful to ask students to consider how the audio shaped their interpretation of the text. To that end, students could be asked to read the text once with the sound, and once without the sound, to see how their perception of the story shifts.

Digital comics such as *Operation Ajax* also often incorporate interdependence of modalities and media to enhance the narrative and reading experience. Here, students are afforded the opportunity, as Dittmar (2012) discusses, to make choices that impact the narrative structure and ultimately the way in which students read and create meaning from the text. In other words, supporting students' active interaction with the narrative aligns with Kirchoff's (2013) argument that digital comics offer an immersive environment to foster an active relationship with texts.

Assignment: multimedia presentation. After reading *Operation Ajax*, students can create multimedia texts or presentations to apply the skills and understanding learned from reading the digital text. Such an assignment would allow students to create meaning by not only weaving together multiple modes of communication, but also by utilizing the interdependence (or intersection) of those modes. Likewise, it provides the opportunity to use technology to compose a dynamic, interactive text in which student composers must consider the unique rhetorical situation and how to both provide the reader with guidance and the freedom to make choices that impact their experience.

When we include this assignment in our classes, we task students with developing their own digital narrative. This can take multiple forms. For example, students could compose an interactive narrative in which readers can choose a path, which allows students to transfer the skills they develop while reading *Operation Ajax* to their compositions. We have found Twinery.org (a free, hypertext-generator) works really well for this; it does take some rudimentary knowledge of coding, but Twinery.org offers an array of helpful videos and wikis to help the novice. Students could also create a narrative that incorporates sound, movement, and images if they prefer. While this could be accomplished using any narrative, we generally allow students to pair the stories with historical situations and artifacts, in much the same fashion they experienced in *Operation Ajax*. There is no shortage of technology tools to pair with this assignment. In our experiences, we have found Microsoft Power Point and Prezi to work well, as most students have previous experience with one or both of them, which allows focus and time to be placed on the composition process

rather than on learning to engage with a new tool. While there are myriad ways teachers can frame this assignment, one prompt we have used in the past reads as follows:

Now that you have read *Operation Ajax*, you are being asked to apply what you learned from your reading and from our discussions to compose your own digital narrative. Specifically, you should give thought to the modes you choose, including the affordances of each and the ways in which they may work interdependently to create meaning for your audience. Likewise, consider how you might make your composition interactive and engaging while establishing a structured narrative.

For teachers interested in providing additional scaffolding and discussion, this can be assigned as a collaborative project, where students work in pairs or small groups. This collaborative approach to multimedia composing includes several benefits, such as requiring students to communicate, to articulate their idea, and to agree or compromise on approaches (Barton, 2005).

Before moving on, it is important to also provide teachers with additional recommendations to maximize the benefits students experience composing digital narratives. We cannot overstate how important it is to provide ample class time not only for reading and discussing *Operation Ajax*, but also for scaffolding the composing process. Class time should be used to model the stages of the composing process for students, to analyze and discuss other mentor texts, to provide and receive feedback on in-process work, and to fully utilize the process. Additionally, it is important to design opportunities for in-class discussions of modes and media, including the affordances and constraints that accompany each. Because this is most likely a new composition type for many students, it is necessary to provide multiple levels of support. That said, we find it important to encourage students to experiment with new approaches, tools, modes, and so forth. This creates situations in which students can, as Glassman and Kang (2011) discuss, engage in and further develop the skill of meaningful problem solving.

Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?

At its heart, Brian Fies's *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* is a father-son story set against the back-drop of the technological innovation taking place from the 1930s (New York's World Fair in 1939) to the 1970s (the final Apollo space mission in 1975). The principal protagonist is Buddy, and his father is aptly named "Pop." Readers might be confused that characters don't age as one would expect—Buddy is a child in 1939, but is still only a teen in 1965 when he and Pop visit Cape Canaveral. In fact, by the end of the story, Buddy is just getting ready for college. Some might argue the age of these characters matter little, though, as Fies is more concerned with telling a scientific history (technological innovation) through historic photos and newspaper clippings and cultural history (primarily comics history) through the interspersing of the fictitious *Space Age Comics*. However, it is worth noting that by not aging these characters traditionally, Fies is striving to emphasize that we become young, awestruck observers when we witness major scientific breakthroughs and innovations. There's a touch of sentimentalism pervading this graphic novel, as Fies is consciously trying to draw on reader nostalgia. As such, instructors should be ready to provide some background information on both the technological innovation taking place between 1939 and 1975, as well as some rudimentary comic book history (we've found History Channel's *Superheroes Unmasked* is appropriate to supplement readers' background knowledge).

Rationale of Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow? as mentor text. Thus far, we have noted how two graphic novels—*The Photographer* and *Operation Ajax*—move beyond the “traditional” multimodality found in comics (e.g. the interplay of image and text). For instance, in *The Photographer*, Guibert primarily tells Lefèvre’s story through photographs, only supplying the more traditional cartoon illustrations to fill in the gaps. Thus, the story is constructed through the multimodality found in the black and white photographs—gesture, facial expression, and perspective, for instance. Conversely, we noted that *Operation Ajax* adds the unique dimension of motion (dynamism) in an effort to influence and/or guide the reader’s pacing. *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow* continues our discussion of how graphic novels can simultaneously enrich and complicate traditional notions of multimodality in efforts to have the *form* inform the *content*. Fies accomplishes this in three distinct, but equally important, ways.

First, Fies primarily tells his story through traditional paneled compilations of word (caption and dialogue balloons) and image; however, Fies also adds a scrapbook quality to his story by also including modified photographs, four old *Space Age Adventures* comics (the fictitious titles created specifically for this graphic novel), and portions of newspaper articles. These elements serve to reinforce that though a fictionalized story, this is being told from the perspective of the narrator as a faux autobiography; we as readers are getting a glimpse into his past, and the additional artifacts give us a more complete image of what the narrator found important at different points in his life. Moreover, these “artifacts” contribute to one of the overarching themes of the text—“Sometimes the old stuff is worth keeping around” (Fies, 2009, p. 177). Here, then, the old photographs, comics, and newspaper articles from a bygone era serve as the “old stuff” that the narrator seemingly scrapbooked.

The four *Space Age Adventure* comics, part of the pastiche that makes up the scrapbook, offer students a tremendous opportunity for visual, and indeed, multimodal analysis. Each comic is meant to be representative of the different “ages” (e.g. gold, silver, bronze) of comics. As such, Fies changes his drawing styles and page layouts to reflect the comics of the time these pieces were supposedly published. For example, the early “gold” age *Space Age Adventure* comic uses halftone and Ben-Day dot patterns—a style that one familiar with comics can easily link to the early comics of the 20th century. This change in art allows students to discuss how *style* can be a powerful connotation tool—how something is colored and arranged on a page matters.

Fies, though, goes a step further in an effort to create the illusion of well-read, old comics. Many of the comics have ink splatters and smears, oil stains close to the spine—presumably caused by staples that were lubricated a bit too much—and faded colors. Moreover, Fies purposefully includes errors—typographical and otherwise—in his earlier stories because, “to Fies, the ‘cheapness’ of 1930s comic books includes a hasty printing, during which a lot of errors occurred” (Bartosch, 2016, p. 245). In addition to adding these elements, Fies also changes the haptic experience for the reader, as the four fictitious comics are printed on different paper stock. Fies specifically sought paper-stock that was cheap, or, as he puts it, “bad” (Bartosch, 2016, p. 246). Though Fies drew these comics on old newspaper stock, he knew that it would still look pristine on a glossy page. Thus, he negotiated with his publisher to use paper-stock that would get as close to the pulps of the early comics as possible (Bartosch, 2016, p. 246). The result is a wide range of tactile experiences for the readers, as the graphic novel is not printed on only one paper-stock—a rarity for graphic novels, and indeed, any book. The unique haptic interaction, then, opens up conversations of materiality—and its impact on the tactile senses—for students. This is an important part of multimodality that is oft under-discussed (see Alexander, 2013; Stein, 2008; and Norris, 2004). *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* facilitates these important

discussions. Additionally, we emphasize to students that even the selection of material can help reinforce an author's purpose or speak to an audience more directly.

Assignment: the scrapbook. The scrapbook writing assignment is often associated with history classes (see Adkison, Woodworth-Neyand, & Hatzenbuehler, 2001; Schur, 2007; and Good, 2013, among others) but it has recently found a home in composition classrooms promoting multimodal composition as well (see Goodburn & Camp, 2004; Mahon, 2011; and Alexander, 2013, among others). Scrapbooks synthesize a number of artifacts to create a cohesive text; for instance, newspaper clippings, old photographs, material objects, and natural objects (e.g. pressed flower petals) could all realistically be found in a scrapbook. While scrapbooks are obviously multimodal in that they integrate some combination of image and text, it is also multimodal in that readers interpret scrapbooks not only through sight, but also through touch and (perhaps) smell. Alexander (2013) finds the haptic element of scrapbooks to be immensely appealing, noting students begin to think about materiality in rhetorical terms—that is, how an object feels can contribute to an argument a rhetor is trying to convey. She goes on to note how materiality also impacts the design of a text; a scrapbook, for instance, is limited to the artifacts available to a student and the student must figure out how to best arrange, modify, and ultimately present these various artifacts into a cogent, readable text. In essence, scrapbooks allow for the form to become part of the content. Alexander suggests this knowledge and understanding of how form influences content “can benefit students in their rhetorical awareness, critical thinking, literacy skills, and transfer of writing concepts from one domain to another” (para. 4).

Though Brian Fies's *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* is not really a scrapbook, it is (in part) presented as one, as at times Fies interweaves newspaper clippings, old photographs, and old comic books throughout his narrative; he even takes it a step further by using different paper-stocks for different portions of his text. Our assignment asks students to take the idea begun in Fies's *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* and build upon it by encouraging composers to focus on the material aspect of multimodality. When we've taught this assignment, we've asked our students to create literacy scrapbooks; it is important to note, though, that the theme of the assignment—the content of the scrapbook—should be tailored to the specific classroom context. Regardless, we've included a brief description of a prompt we've used in the past:

Your task is to create a literacy scrapbook. This scrapbook should contain mementos and artifacts that tell the story of how you perceive writing and reading. Consider the following as you reflect on your literacy history: what is an early memory about writing or reading? Why is this event significant? Who taught you to read or write, and how/why were they successful? What book/text had a positive/negative impact on your reading/writing life? Why? These questions are meant to guide you to thinking about what artifacts to include in your scrapbook.

The scrapbook assignment links well with Brian Fies's graphic novel, as Fies utilizes a lot of the principles found in scrapbooking in the assemblage of his unique graphic narrative. After discussing the rhetorical choices regarding artifact collection and presentation in *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* it makes sense to ask students to create their own scrapbooks. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, this project helps students develop their multimodal literacy skills. They need to consider which artifacts to include and how those artifacts

help their overall literacy narrative. As they select their artifacts, students need to consider the “usual” aspects of multimodality—for instance, the interplay of image, text, color, space, and so forth—but also the haptic (tactile) aspect as well. After they’ve selected their artifacts, they need to consider the presentation (how will they affix their artifacts to the page? How many artifacts to a page?) and the organization of their artifacts (in which order should they be presented and why?). In short, this project allows students to begin concretely visualizing how form impacts—and in some cases, becomes—the content.

Composing Graphic Narratives

For those interested in asking students to use graphic novels as mentor texts for composing their own graphic narratives, we offer an additional assignment we have experienced success with and that our students have found useful: the traditional print graphic novel. This assignment naturally pairs well with any of the three graphic novels we have discussed in this article. While we have provided three specific assignments based on the three texts we recommend, we also believe it is important to offer a multimodal project that can be used with any of the graphic novels. The graphic narrative is a natural assignment to pair with any graphic novel and can allow students to use their experiences reading a graphic novel to guide their composing processes. In fact, we have incorporated this assignment (or a version of it) in our teacher education and composition and rhetoric classes on multiple occasions. As such, we suggest having students compose graphic narratives by tasking students with analyzing the form of one of the graphic novels we describe above and then creating their own graphic text representing their analysis of that textual form (i.e., mimicking the form of the graphic novel). In other words, students use similar approaches to the author(s) and texts they analyzed to create their own graphic novel. We find this assignment fosters critical thinking, problem solving, ability to compose in non-traditional ways, and overall learning. To provide a clearer view of the project we use, a sample prompt might read:

For this assignment, your task is to compose your own graphic narrative based on your analysis of one or more of our in-class readings (you may also propose a graphic text you’ve read outside of class). As such, you will select a text, study/analyze the methods of the comic artist or graphic novelist, and mimic those approaches in the creation of your own graphic narrative.

The specific requirements vary for us. Ultimately, it comes down to our purpose and what we want students to experience and to wrestle with, but we often provide basic parameters (e.g., 6-8 pages of graphic text with 3-6 panels on each), and encourage students to make intentional decisions for themselves, and we often ask them to articulate their reasons to us throughout the composing process. These parameters are meant to serve simply as guidelines and not as rules or constraints. The goal, after all, is for students to create a composition that demonstrates their ability to analyze the form of a mentor text and apply, by mimicking, that skill to their own creations.

We also provide students with examples of composing methods. For example, we discuss Microsoft Word and Power Point, Comic Life, hand drawing, collage, and other options available to students. Here, we want students to make intentional decisions as to how they create their graphic narratives. To ensure students can maximize their time working on the project and not on learning new programs, we take the time in class to walk students through how to use the technology and digital tools. Regardless of the approach used, we encourage teachers to provide

adequate class time to model for students, to answer all technical questions, and to discuss examples from other students.

Assessing Multimodal Composing Projects

As part of this conversation, it is important to discuss the role of assessment in multimodal composing. This can be yet another challenge for teachers less familiar with incorporating multiple modes of communication into their classrooms. In fact, multimodal projects often become add-ons to more traditional composing assignments (e.g., now that you've written a character analysis essay, create a picture representing your character) and are often assessed as such (e.g., not including the visual creation component on the character analysis essay rubric). Valuing multimodal projects as important and academically sanctioned literacy practices requires teachers to rethink traditional methods of assessment to include non-traditional elements and rhetorical situations.

We suggest constructing and using a rubric designed specifically to evaluate multiple modes and important rhetorical decisions, especially as teachers begin to familiarize themselves and their students with new composing methods. Moreover, we encourage teachers to consider including students in developing relevant and important assessment criteria for each project used in the classroom. This can provide students with opportunities to develop a language for talking about assessment and to consider just what it is that makes the use of multiple modes effective in their own composing processes. It is also quite beneficial to engage students in self-assessment and peer-evaluation. These practices require reflection, metacognitive thought, and critical thinking, which can increase learning and abilities to compose.

For those interested in criteria to use as a starting point, we offer three such suggestions. First, Wyatt-Smith and Kimber (2009) offer a framework from which to draw. They suggested three principles, including ensuring teachers and students share a common language for discussing assessment, using dynamic tools as part of the assessment process, and involving both the product and the process in assessment. Likewise, the authors provided several concepts for teachers to consider when designing assessment. These include (1) design, (2) visualization, (3) modal affordances, and (4) modal cohesion. Incorporating these concepts can aid teachers in going beyond a holistic impression of a student composition to focus on both individual modes and the ways in which the chosen modes work synergistically.

Second, we have previously written (Cook & Kirchoff, 2015) about multimodal assessment for teachers, which we feel can help teachers begin to make a smooth transition to assessing multimodal projects as well. Here, we offer four elements for use in rubric design:

1. Linguistic design focuses on the use of alphabetic text.
2. Visual design involves the use of visuals and visual organization/layout to add meaning.
3. Auditory design includes the incorporation of sound.
4. Overall design places emphasis on the creation of a coherent whole.

Depending on the project assigned, teachers can select any combination of these criteria to create a relevant rubric. Regardless of the criteria selected, we have experienced success using a five-point scale, in which a score of one represents poor cohesion and five represents excellent cohesion. Total points can be easily added together and converted into a more traditional grading scale or aligned with a standards-based grading approach.

Third, to further assist teachers with beginning to think about their own ways of assessing student compositions as effective texts that use a variety of modalities, we offer a brief discussion of a rubric we constructed (see Appendix for complete rubric) as part of our own classroom teaching. Our goal was to create an instrument that fostered objective and rigorous analysis and assessment of our students' graphic compositions, specifically the ways in which they utilize multiple modes of communication to craft rhetorically savvy texts. Similar to the criteria described above, we incorporated a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) with this rubric, as it allows for efficient evaluation of student work. The rubric itself is comprised of four overall categories, each containing multiple assessment statements that we change or tweak depending on the assignment. In constructing the categories (audience and purpose, organization and modality, rhetorical decisions, and content), we borrowed from VanKooten's (2013) suggestions for assessing students' uses of new media. To ensure the rubric accurately accounts for the context (i.e., the local classroom) in which students compose, teachers may also include two additional categories (peer review and revision, and conventions). Using these categories to drive student assessment can allow educators to quickly and reliably assess the work students create.

One final assessment-related method we often incorporate involves engaging students in reflection. For us, reflection is a vital component of multimodal composition and assessment, as it requires students to think deeply about the approaches they utilized and to walk readers (and themselves) through the rhetorical decisions they made. This student reflection is not only metacognitive in nature, but it allows the teacher clearer insight into student process, experience, and product, so it serves a wonderful assessment purpose. Likewise, it promotes self-assessment. Anyone interested in incorporating a reflective component can select prompts that intentionally focus students on specific aspects of the composition or may choose to be more holistic in nature. While the examples provided below are not meant to serve as prompts for any and all multimodal composing, we have often provided our students with versions of the following. In your reflection, you should discuss:

- the decisions you made regarding images, text, color, and/or any other mode you utilized. Please offer textual evidence by pointing your reader to specific components of your composition (feel free to make this a hybrid essay and include visuals of your examples).
- your composing process. What process did you use and why? What frustrated you or was difficult? What did you enjoy?
- your self-evaluation of your product.
- your opinions of the educational merit of the project.

Ultimately, classroom teachers are best situated to make assessment decisions for their own students. After all, no one knows a classroom community like the teacher. As such, we encourage teachers to use their knowledge of their students to drive all assessment (and instruction, for that matter) decisions. Our hope is that the three rubric and assessment suggestions provided here serve as a starting point for teachers and as frameworks for organizing their own assessment ideas and approaches.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, it continues to be important to engage students with multimodal texts in order to help them develop vital multimodal literacy skills (Serafini, 2014). Graphic novels serve as a great site for sponsoring this literacy development in students (Frey & Fisher, 2008;

Fisher & Frey, 2011, 2014; Jacobs, 2007; Smetana, 2010). Moreover, the skills gained from reading and composing multimodal texts, such as graphic novels, are transferable to other literacy practices, including traditional alphabetic text consumption and composition (Frey 2003; Frey & Fisher, 2008).

To further this discussion, we have offered suggestions for using three graphic novels as mentor texts and shared accompanying multimodal composition assignments to use with students. First, we discussed *The Photographer* by Guibert and Lefèvre, which includes a combination of actual photographs and comic paneling, art, and text, as a way to allow students to examine the ways in which illustrations and photographs can work collaboratively to tell a story. Paired with that text, we shared a photo essay assignment, where students must make authorial decisions (e.g., organization and diverse visual representations) to compose a comprehensive narrative.

Second, we argued for the use of the digital comic, *Operation Ajax* by Burwen and De Seve. This text offers readers a unique interactive and immersive experience, similar to gaming or film, and can help students make meaning from layered modalities, such as movement, sound, and interactivity. Additionally, the text offers support for pacing and information literacy by providing background knowledge through documents and source material. To accompany *Operation Ajax*, we suggested a multimedia presentation, where students create meaning through the use of digital affordances, including sound, motion, and reader interaction.

The third text we suggested was *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* by Fies, a text that weaves together photographs, newspaper articles, and other cultural artifacts. This eclectic collection of materials and modalities can be used to help readers analyze text and evaluate the ways in which form can inform content. To foster composition of a similar text, we shared a scrapbook assignment, which encourages students to synthesize a variety of artifacts to compose a coherent text.

To further assist teachers, we have also shared an assignment for composing graphic narratives, as well as ideas for assessing students' multimodal compositions. Our suggestions are meant to stimulate ideas among educators by providing brief explanations of the texts, assignments, and assessment strategies that have worked well for us. It is important, however, to recognize that there are many other useful texts (e.g. Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, Will Eisner's *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories*, Zeina Abirached's *A Game For Swallows*, Liz Prince's *Tomboy*, Lucy Knisley's *Relish: My Life in the Kitchen*, and Scott McCloud's *The Sculptor*, to name a few) and myriad other valuable assignments (e.g., collage, game comic, narrative database, etc.) possible. Likewise, each of the assignments we provided can be tweaked to meet any instructor's classroom goals and objectives. Finally, although we, and our students, have experienced success with the texts and assignments described here, we encourage teachers to continue looking for other engaging, rigorous ways to help students develop the multimodal literacy skills relevant in our 21st century world.

While our piece offers valuable ways that graphic novels can be used as multimodal literacy sponsors and mentor texts, we do acknowledge that more research could help work towards a larger understanding of the role(s) of graphic novels in multimodal literacy instruction, including graphic novels as mentor texts for a variety of multimodal compositions. Specifically, the field might benefit from moving beyond anecdotal stories regarding the use of graphic novels as multimodal literacy sponsors by offering quantitative and qualitative studies. These studies could offer more concrete evidence regarding the veracity of graphic novels as multimodal literacy sponsors.

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Appendix

Multimodal Composition Rubric

Note:

1 = Strongly Disagree

3 = Neutral

5 = Strongly Agree

Category One: Audience and Purpose

Through the conscious use of multiple modes, the author clearly establishes a purpose for the text.

1 2 3 4 5

Through the conscious employment of multiple modes, the author's intended audience is apparent.

1 2 3 4 5

Category Two: Organization and Modality

Multiple modes (image, text, sound, motion) are employed.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used in the text are complementary (in regards to content) with one another.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used in the text are complementary (in regards to placement) with one another.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used are employed with readability and consumption in mind.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used are formatted appropriately and correctly so that access is not an issue.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used are the best modal choices for the intended audience.

1 2 3 4 5

The modes used are the best modal choices for achieving the author's purpose.

1 2 3 4 5

Category Three: Rhetorical Decisions

If text is used, the font/typography is appropriate for the purpose and audience of the text.

1 2 3 4 5

If sound is used, the tonal quality is appropriate for the purpose and audience of the text.

1 2 3 4 5

If text and/or image used, the color choices positively impact the purpose of the text.

1 2 3 4 5

If sound or video is used, the length of the clips is appropriate for the purpose and audience of the text.

1 2 3 4 5

Through the use of multiple modes, relevant allusion, metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche is achieved.

1 2 3 4 5

Category Four: Content

Through the conscious use of multiple modes, the author makes meaningful commentary regarding the topic at hand.

1 2 3 4 5

Through the conscious use of multiple modes, the author develops an idea relevant to the class material.

1 2 3 4 5