

Bridging the Disconnect: A Layered Approach to Jump-Starting Engagement

Do we have to read this? Why do I have to do this? Every teacher has gotten this reaction from middle level students at some time. While we know that student motivation and engagement are essential components of learning, pulling in students who radiate apathy or resistance toward school work is an ongoing challenge. How can we reach those young adolescents who seem to only care about what happens outside of school walls?

As we began our collaborative investigation of how to best address this problem within our own teaching context, four factors immediately rose to the forefront: the use of writing as a tool for engagement and learning, the necessity to prepare our students to compete in an increasingly digitized world, the motivational appeal of the graphic novel genre, and the need to interweave the social aspects of learning with teaching.

Rules of Engagement

In this article, we delineate the steps we took to ramp up our efforts to reach out to our students by purposefully retooling our teaching. The first step was to identify and acknowledge the components of pedagogy and practice that we would need to maintain and enhance; the second was to decide how we could practically weave them together in a cohesive approach that would effectively awaken our students and get them involved and invigorated as they improved their literacy skills.

In our small, rural school in northern Pennsylvania, we have worked with middle level students who do their work regularly, but only because it is expected of them. They move through the motions, immersed in academics but not engaged. Others begin to exhibit the “I don’t care” attitude right around the glorious middle school years, and rebel actively against all forms of compliance. In both cases, effective and deep learning is not happening in the classroom.

The type of disenfranchisement described above is, of course, not unique to our school. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS, 2009) reports that approximately 20% of those students who start high school in our state do not finish their secondary studies here or at all; that number is actually 10% better than the national average of 30%, and a great deal higher than the lowest-ranking states, where the drop-out rate hovers between 40–50%. By sharing the details of our work, our goal goes beyond sparking our teaching colleagues to push the envelope of new literacies in their own teaching. By working collaboratively, teachers can layer traditional practices together with multiple aspects of new literacies, increasing student engagement and achievement.

The Writing on the Wall

As teacher consultants in the National Writing Project, we were fueled by our own passions for and educational background in the use of writing as a tool for learning. The National Commission on Writing (2006) calls writing “thought on paper” (p. 51), and this concept reflects the goals of our work; we want students who are actively thinking and processing information. The step of articulating those thoughts by giving them

substance on the page is one we considered to be essential. The power of writing to shape thinking is well documented (Langer & Applebee, 1987/2007), and we knew it would be a central component of any work that we undertook.

The work of DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, and Hicks would become highly influential in how we chose to utilize writing. In their book, *Because Digital Writing Matters* (National Writing Project, DeVoss, Eidman-Aahahl, & Hicks, 2010), they emphasize, "Writing instruction appropriate for the world today requires us to consider what new skills and dispositions students might need for the digital age" (p. 11). With this in mind, we turned our attention to the potential and pitfalls posed by the technology available in our setting and context.

Going Digital

Students, regardless of community demographics, socio-economic backgrounds, gender, and grade, tell us year after year that the lack of sophisticated use of emerging technology in school is holding back their education and disengaging them from learning. This hard realization that today's classroom environment does not mirror the way today's students are living their lives outside of school or what they need to be well prepared to participate, thrive, and compete in the 21st century economy is actually exacerbating the existing relevancy crisis in American education.

—The Speak Up National Research Project (Project Tomorrow, 2010)

The results of the Speak Up survey supported exploration into the concept that outdated modes of instruction and materials may be a key element in the disconnect we were sensing from our students. More specifically, the gap between the daily digital literacy practices of our students and the text-heavy, paper-and-pen practices of the traditional class was a significant problem.

Further research supported this theory. Stephens and Ballast (2010) noted that while high schools are well-structured to meet the needs of the society they were built to serve, that society was one that pre-dates the electric light (and indoor plumbing). Will Richardson (2010) notes, "Our students' realities in terms of the way they

communicate and learn are very different from our own. By and large, they are 'out there' using a wide variety of technologies that they are told they can't use when they come to school" (p. 6).

Since the actual array of technological tools that are available today are mind-boggling, we knew that we would have to carefully consider our choices, keeping the twin foci of engagement and achievement as our guideposts. We surveyed our own past practices, looking for direction. The answer came when we revisited our use of graphic novels. These had struck a chord with many of our aliterate students in the past; could they be the unifying element in our new project as well?

Getting Graphic

Many educators refuse to even consider graphic novels worthy of being used for instruction or to recognize any value in the genre; however, graphic novels offer "value, variety, and a new medium for literacy that acknowledges the appeal of visuals and is appealing to young people," (Schwarz, 2002, pp. 262–263). Rather than exemplifying the dumbing down of expectations and curriculum, graphic novels make rigorous cognitive demands on readers by requiring them to make meaning from visuals and non-orthographic cues, as well as text.

Armed with stacks of graphic novels from personal, school, and community libraries, we conducted book talks on each title and allowed students choice in selecting titles. They were asked to read a minimum of three different graphic novels over the course of a week. To frontload, we gave each student full-page spreads from Sunday comics sections and a vocabulary list featuring graphic novel terminology, like panel, frame, gutter, bleed, speech/thought bubbles, narrative box, and splash panel. As each term was introduced and discussed, students located examples in the comic strips and made comments in the margins. Different formats were identified, points of view were explored, and an appreciation of the marriage between art and limited words was developed.

While they were reading, we asked students to answer a variety of reflective questions using a Web 2.0 tool called Edmodo (www.edmodo.com), which offers free online services for teachers and their students in a protected, school-safe forum that has a visual format similar to Facebook—a site most of our student use to socialize out of school. We subscribed to the perspective that “[d]igital writing matters because we live in a networked world and there’s no going back. Because, quite simply, *digital is*” (NWP et al., 2010, p. ix). With that inevitability, we blended both worlds—graphic novels as a new literacy and social networking through Edmodo. In Edmodo, students logged into their *GrApHiC NoVeLs* class and replied to posts provided by both of us.

Merging Digital Comics and Publishing

Fisher (2007) notes that we can move beyond having a good collection of graphic novels and encourage students to write in this genre (p. 35). After selecting and reading three graphic novels and reflecting through social networking, students were provided a culminating activity via Edmodo. While six Web services were provided, the majority of students chose to use Bitstrips (www.bitstrips.com) to construct their own comic strip. The main focus was on creating an original work depicting one of the themes, such as friendship (see Fig. 1) or conflict and resolution (see Fig. 2), that was addressed in the graphic novels they had read. Once completed, students submitted their projects digitally through Edmodo’s assignment feature. This allowed for immediate authorship and feedback, which seldom happens with pen-and-paper assignments.

All for Naught, or Good for All?

As part of the social networking conversations, we asked the students to respond to the following post:

Many schools, administrators, librarians, and teachers do not allow graphic novels to be used because they do not consider them “real reading.” In fact, some schools have banned them from their libraries. Now that you’ve had some exposure to graphic

novels, do you see value in reading them? Do you think teachers should use them for teaching reading or other subjects?

Answers varied, but overwhelmingly the responses indicated that we had reached our students:

“I believe that schools and teachers should be allowed to teach or let students read with graphic novels. Some students may not see the picture line of what’s happening in the story so since graphic novels have pictures with them, the student can understand much more of a visual. You read them just like you do with any other book, left to right, top to bottom. They have value just like any other book even if it’s like a comic strip.” (Paige)

“I think [graphic novels are] real reading. I think schools should use them because they are fun and



Figure 1.

would get kids more excited about reading. Some graphic novels make it easier to understand with the pictures. Also, less information means you will have to work a lot harder to figure out the story." (Anna)

"Teachers should use graphic novels for teaching. They are fun to read and they put a new spin on regular books. Graphic novels are also a great way to incorporate fun nonfiction materials in everyday learning. They contain all of the elements that a "regular story" does. The pictures might also appeal to kids who are intimidated by many pages of just words. Every school should have graphic novels!" (Cassandra)



www.bitstripsforschools.com

Figure 2.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Engaging Students through Comic Books and Challenged Books

Getting students motivated is of utmost importance in the learning process. One way to motivate students is to present new and different texts. The authors share how they presented graphic novels to their classes. In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson "**The Comic Book Show and Tell,**" students encounter an authentic writing experience designed to get them thinking about their choices as writers and how they can best get their mental images out of their head and onto the page. After exploring how comic books are made and learning the terms and techniques associated with the genre, students write their own comic book scripts. They then pass their script to another student, who draws the script as close to form as possible based on the information the writer provided.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/comic-book-show-tell-921.html>

Some of the books the students wanted to read weren't allowed in their schools. Students could use the lesson plan "**A Case for Reading—Examining Challenged and Banned Books**" to write persuasive pieces expressing their views about what should be done with the books at their school.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/case-reading-examining-challenged-410.html>

Are You Ready to Get Started?

We feel that we have struck a chord with the digital natives in our middle school classrooms. For our students, the layering of alternate texts, computer-facilitated written discussion, and digitally supported illustration proved to be an effective combination. This project engaged our students and enhanced their learning because it was built upon their need to bridge school literacy with their world, allowing them find value and build connections IRL (in real life).

Edmodo and Bitstrips are just two of the many online digital tools available for teachers to use with their students, and most school libraries have built up their graphic novel inventory in recent years. With this in mind, replication of our project should be a simple undertaking. However, we are not advocating replication. Our project was successful because we worked together to set common goals for our students, then layered in aspects of the new literacies that have come to dominate their social worlds. Each teacher had been experimenting with different digital tools and alternate texts and had developed an understanding of the potential of each for helping students connect and grow academically. Through collaboration and professional dialogue, these aspects all came together to form a multimodal project that was both demanding and resilient.

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