THE COMIC CORE:  
A THEORY OF TEACHING  
SEQUENTIAL ART NARRATIVES

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by

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A THEORY OF TEACHING
SEQUENTIAL ART NARRATIVES

presented by NICHOLAS T. KREMER

a candidate for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Sam Cohen
DEDICATION

To the teachers - Mrs. Ganey, Mr. Becker, Mr. Burns, Dr. Orchard, and many more unnamed – who helped to shape the literacy of my life
I am deeply indebted to Dr. Roy Fox and the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Amy Lannin, Dr. Kathy Unrath, and Dr. Sam Cohen, for their support and guidance at every stage of this project: for providing fascinating courses of study and models of research that built the background knowledge I needed to undertake this work, for offering valuable insights and advice as I plunged deeper down the rabbit hole, for remaining patiently persistent as I slowly but surely came back through the other side of the looking glass, and above all, for always being warmly human in our various adventures.

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It is almost certain that without the Missouri Writing Project, within whose 2008 Summer Institute the very first seedlings of this dissertation manifested themselves in a teaching demonstration undertaken on a personal whim (indicative of the creative inquiry and pedagogy that occurs there), I never would have (re)-stumbled upon the little white (comic-book) rabbit from my adolescence that has gotten me into so much delicious trouble since then.

And it is completely certain that without parents like my mom and dad, Tom and Kaye Kremer, who made literacy such an authentic part of my existence that I cannot remember life without it and who refused to confine an active imagination within walls of conformity, that I am confident I would have very little to contribute to this topic (or very many others in life). I pray that I have even a fraction of the positive influence in others’ lives that you have had on mine.

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THE COMIC CORE:  
A THEORY OF TEACHING  
SEQUENTIAL ART NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This research study develops a theory of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives grounded in the experiences of six graduate students and twelve junior high school students who studied graphic novels within their respective English Language Arts courses, which coalesced during a shared field teaching experience. Video recordings of all class sessions, field notes taken during observations, student interviews, and student compositions (both prose and multimodal) comprised the data set used to develop the theory, which establishes that sequential art narratives should be taught in conjunction with visual literacy modeling, quality mentor texts, and frequent opportunities for student collaboration, creative composition, and transmediation experimentation within a gradual release of (instructor) responsibility framework. A visual model of the proposed theory is included in the findings.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study
The Problem and Its Historical Context
Need for the Study
Research Questions
Research Design

Purpose of the Study

I still remember the incredulous look I received from a colleague during my first week of teaching (in 2006) when I dared to ask, “So what graphic novels do we have in our Language Arts resource center?” As a fairly avid reader of comic books growing up, I knew first-hand the many benefits the medium held. In fact, it had taught me enough about visual literacy to know that the question I just posed needed no oral answer. At the height of No Child Left Behind, with a standardized state reading test that had less visuals on it than its math counterpart, my fellow teacher’s expression made it clear that there was no room in the curriculum for “aimless diversions.”

What a difference a decade can make. Ten years later, in an era of Common Core State Standards, I would have loved to have seen that same colleague’s face the moment she looked at one of the first sample performance events ever released by the Smarter Balanced Consortium, an organization designing new standardized assessments
for dozens of states across the country to replace existing “high-stakes” state exams. The student directions read:

Today you will write an argumentative essay for publication in a school newspaper on whether or not graphic novels should be used in Middle-School English and Language Arts classrooms. You will first be given a prose and graphic-novel version of the same scene from a literary work. You will then read and listen to two authors’ opposing views before writing your argumentative essay. (SBAC ELA.07.PT.2.07.086)

Students are additionally asked to answer open-ended questions during the assessment inquiring about their comprehension of the texts and their ability to analyze the aesthetic choices made by the author when adapting the literary work into a visual narrative.

Just like that, comics have gone from outcast to VIP in thousands of classrooms across the country, many of which employ teachers who have never previously read anything within the medium outside of what can be found in a Sunday newspaper. It is doubtful, then, that mere exposure to this type of reading will be enough on its own to develop the mastery of the medium and critical thinking skills necessary for students to successfully complete assignments like the aforementioned Smarter Balanced performance assessment.
Therefore, this research study seeks to develop a theory of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives – a set of comic core standards by which to plan and deliver instruction – so that students are better equipped to navigate the medium and other visual texts when they encounter them in and outside of school.

The Problem and Its Historical Context

“Comics” and “classrooms” were antonyms for most of the twentieth century, due in no small part to psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s best-selling (and bogus) publication, Seduction of the Innocent (1954). The text denounced comics as a primary cause of juvenile delinquency, citing depictions of violence, covert sexuality, and drug use in their storylines, and illustrating, with undocumented anecdotal claims, how similar behavior was exhibited in youth who read them. The book’s popularity led to Wertham’s inclusion as an “expert” witness in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency that met later that year, which in turn, frightened publishers into developing the Comics Code Authority, an act of reactionary self-censorship for an entire medium that would endure for many decades to come. Images, words, even entire genres were banned, while “sanitized” values prevailed, paralyzing the relatively new literary form
in a permanent state of infancy until the late 1980s and casting a reputation to the same effect that still persists today.

Against such a backdrop, it is no wonder that little academic research currently exists investigating best practices for using comics, graphic novels, and other visual and print narratives (all contained under the blanket term “sequential art narratives,” coined by scholar and iconic comic artist/writer Will Eisner) in educational settings. Teachers, librarians, and administrators traditionally have been reluctant to incorporate sequential art narratives into their curricula, largely due to the perpetuating stereotype that the entire medium provides a stunted, intellectually-inferior literacy experience. As a result, most of the scholarly writing that does exist regarding sequential art narratives focuses on rigorously defending the integrity of the medium and providing various rationales for its inclusion in educational settings.

The movement largely started with Will Eisner’s series of influential lectures at the School of Visual Arts in New York City where he defined the basic elements of sequential art narratives and illustrated (literally) the manner in which those principles could be uniquely applied through the medium. Eisner (1985) discussed paneling, lettering, visual timing, visual rhythm, and encapsulation, concepts that were later popularized with those outside of the trade by
Scott McCloud (1993), whose instructional text *Understanding Comics* – itself ingeniously constructed as a graphic novel – is regarded by many to be the primary foundation for analysis of the sequential art narrative medium.

The success of the movement to transform public perception of sequential art narratives begun by pioneers like Eisner and McCloud, however, owes much credit to the production of high-quality graphic novels that have emerged in the past three decades. A team of scholars from around the country recently released a collection of rationales for inclusion of over one-hundred graphic novels in the classroom (Carter, 2010). Chief among them is Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1986), which poignantly relays his father’s Holocaust memoir, and in doing so upon its publication, spear-headed a shift in popular sentiment about the ability for comics to be considered as serious literature.

It also spawned a wave of other award-winning graphic memoirs, including Marjane Sartrapi’s *Perspolis* (2003), a coming-of-age story during the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Peter Sis’s *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007), Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* (1993) and *Safe Area Gorazde* (2000), and Jean-Phillipe Stassen’s *Deogratias: A Story of Rwanda* (2006). The combination of visual and verbal symbol systems in these texts creates a powerfully immersive
historical context for readers unlike any experience achieved in a single modality.

Within the realm of fiction, Alan Moore’s and David Gibbon’s *Watchmen* (1986) is noteworthy, regarded by many critics as the seminal work of the comic book medium, for its multi-layered structure, its modernist deconstruction of the super-hero genre, its critique of 1980’s American politics, and its illustration of the unique properties of sequential art narratives. Frank Miller’s *Dark Knight Returns* (1986), which concurrently applied many of the same thematic treatments to the iconic superhero, Batman, worked in tandem with *Watchmen* to modernize the comic book industry and pave the way for darker, more mature content matter, the likes of which would include such critically-acclaimed series as Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* (1989-1996), Kurt Busiek’s *Astro City* (1996-2010), and Bill Willingham’s *Fables* (2002-present).

More recently, Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* (2007) has brought immediacy to the immigrant experience by trapping readers in a wordless, perplexing new world, forcing them, like the story’s protagonist, to make meaning exclusively through visual experiences. Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006) seamlessly weaves multiple narratives together to paint an emotionally-powerful composite of a boy’s search for racial identity and acceptance. Garreth
Hinds masterfully brings the legend of *Beowulf* (2007) to life in a way few traditional textbooks are able. And many more critically-acclaimed graphic novels have, and continue to, become available to readers with each passing year of the new millennium, as the medium gains more credibility and commercial success.

While the existence of engaging, sophisticated, academically-rigorous texts should itself provide sufficient basis for inclusion in any English Language Arts course, other compelling reasons also exist for utilizing the medium as a whole in schools. There is recurring, well-documented research that indicates that immersion in reading and writing comics through after-school clubs can lead to significant literacy gains (in some cases, across the curriculum) for reluctant readers in urban settings (Bitz 2004, 2006, 2009, 2010). Similar gains are found when the medium is used as a pedagogical tool for second-language acquisition (Cary 2004); its visual elements provide an authentic supplementary context for comprehension. In a related nature, comics have proven to be an effective method for helping students of all backgrounds gain exposure to and maintain retention of new vocabulary words (Carter & Erikson, 2010). And many researchers have illustrated how sequential art narratives can be used to promote twenty-first century skills in students, most notably, visual

It is largely because of this research that when the Common Core State Standards – a national framework for ensuring college and career readiness among students – were released in 2010, they included literacy standards that implicitly and explicitly mention the use of sequential art narratives within them. For example, Reading Standard RL.5.7 asks students to be able to “analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel).” Reading Standard RL.7.7 prompts students to “compare and contrast a written story...to its multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium.” Reading Standard RI.8.7 requires students to “evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums to present a particular topic or idea.” And Writing Standard W.9-10.2a encourages students to “…include formatting, graphics, and multimedia [in writing] when useful to aiding comprehension.”

With 46 of 50 states across the country having adopted and working to implement the Common Core State Literacy Standards, and high stakes tests like the previously mentioned Smarter Balanced Assessment example prominently featuring visual texts in their
designs, it appears the case for comics in the classroom may now have finally and successfully been made.

**Need for the Study**

What is considerably less-developed, however, is a body of research indicating how to best use sequential art narratives in the classroom in a way that will enable students to successfully meet the aforementioned reading and writing standards. Since until recently the primary need was to establish broad credibility for *why* sequential art narratives should be used in educational settings, only within the last few years have scholars begun to investigate the question of *how* they should be incorporated.

A variety of articles illustrate thematic connections between graphic novels and traditional prose texts taught in common 9-12 Language Arts curricula (Carter 2007). A smaller collection highlights the ways various college professors use visual texts in their assorted disciplines (Tabachnick 2009). However, most of these writings provide descriptions of the symbiosis that can exist between specific graphic novels and other canonical texts or topics and do not discuss the pedagogical methodologies used in helping students maximally engage the visual medium as a whole.
An instructional guide for K-12 teachers was published in 2009 containing methods and ready-to-use activities for applying traditional literacy techniques to comics (Monnin 2009), but this text does not delve much into theory and leaves many unanswered questions about genuine differences in approach that might exist between teaching traditional prose stories and visual narratives.

When it comes to composing sequential art narratives, varying step-by-step templates have been published by the Comic Book Project (Bitz 2010) and the National Council of Teachers of English (Carter 2009), but there is no research that investigates the benefits and drawbacks of the proposed methods, or a comparative analysis of the outcomes yielded by the various approaches. And with a growing number of digital tools available by which to create comics online, there is no readily available research investigating the varying learning outcomes that may come from different approaches to composition.

Thus, further study into the best pedagogical practices for sequential art narratives is needed, particularly research that investigates approaches to the medium holistically instead of offering stand-alone solutions for dealing with a particular graphic novel, mini-lesson, or writing assignment that deals with visual narratives. This research study attempts to offer a first step in that direction.
Research Questions

In seeking to develop a framework of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives, the following questions guided and provided focus to this study:

Central Question:

- How do the pedagogical decisions made during a study of sequential art narratives affect students’ abilities to critically engage when reading and composing within the medium?
- What theory emerges as a model of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students?

Sub-Questions:

- How (if at all) do students’ understanding of, attitude towards, and aptitude for verbal literacy, visual literacy, and sequential art narratives as a distinct type of text change throughout the course of the unit?
- How do verbal and visual literacies interact when reading or composing texts with visual elements?
- How does explicit instruction in the vocabulary and concepts associated with the medium of sequential art narratives affect student comprehension and composition within the medium?
• What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from reading sequential art narratives in the following manners:
  o Independently?
  o Collectively with a partner?
  o Collectively in a small group?
  o Collectively as a full class guided by the instructor?
• What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from engaging in the following writing processes:
  o Adapting existing prose / poetry / scripts into a sequential art format?
  o Developing an original narrative directly into a sequential art format?
  o Utilizing sequential art design software as a proxy for hand-drawn illustration?

For the purpose of this study, **sequential art narrative** will be defined as any text composed of “juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the [reader]” (McCloud 6). **Pedagogy** will be defined as any instructive strategy a teacher makes in the pursuit of helping students attain particular learning goals.
**Research Design**

In order to investigate the aforementioned research questions, data were collected from two considerably different classes of students engaged in a study of graphic novels during the spring of 2011.

The first class consisted of six graduate students enrolled in a sixteen-week course entitled “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” in the College of Education at a major Midwestern university. The course met once a week for 2.5 hours and was taught by Dr. Roy Fox, chair of this dissertation. Its primary objective was for students to “explore the theory, research, and practice of visual/verbal texts, especially the graphic novel” (Graduate Course Syllabus – Appendix A, January 2011). Major learning activities and assignments in the course included:

a) reading/discussing two graphic novels as a class [*Kings in Disguise* (Vance and Burr), *American Born Chinese* (Yang)]

b) writing a visual-verbal analysis paper of an independently-selected graphic novel

c) composing a brief, original graphic narrative

d) designing an introductory unit of study for sequential art narratives and teaching one or more lessons in a field experience.
Three of the graduate students enrolled in the course were full-time teachers in local school districts and completed their field experience with their own students; the other three graduate students teamed up to teach a full month-long unit of instruction in graphic novels to a local junior high school reading class (the other group of students researched during this study).

This second class was comprised of twelve eighth and ninth grade students enrolled in an elective Reading Enrichment course in a suburban Midwestern junior high school. The course met daily for 50 minutes and its purpose was to “expand student literacy skills through immersive studies into various genres and media of literature” (Junior High Course Syllabus – Appendix B, August 2010). Course objectives asked students to:

- Identify the medium/genre of a piece of literature
- Articulate the defining characteristics of a medium/genre
- Read, comprehend, and meaningfully respond to texts without professional guidance
- Evaluate a piece of literature critically
- Demonstrate basic creative writing skills within various media/genres of literature

Units of instruction were grouped by genre/medium, and students generally engaged in an instructional model alternating between full-
class inquiry into a collectively-read text and periods of independent reading/writing workshop. I was the teacher of record for the course, but during the graphic novel unit being studied, I abdicated my teaching responsibilities (including lesson design, facilitation, and student assessment) to the three graduate students participating in the field experience and instead became a silent observer/researcher.

The graphic novel unit occurred during four consecutive weeks in April following the junior high school’s Spring Break and was preceded by a Theatre/Script unit. The first graduate student, Sawyer, designed a series of lessons around the first act of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, using the play as a bridge between the two units and ultimately asking students to create a sequential art “storyboard” of a given passage.

Next, another graduate student, Jane, who was serving as a student-teacher in the course all semester, provided explicit instruction in sequential art terms/concepts and visual literacy modeling. She then led students through full-class and partner readings of a graphic novel (The Arrival - Tan), a small group reading of a graphic novel (Kings in Disguise – Vance and Burr), and an independent reading workshop of student self-selected graphic novels (See Table 2 on page 82 for a list of SAN titles selected for independent reading). Finally, she facilitated a writing workshop
where students were asked to adapt an original poem they had written earlier in the year into a sequential art format.

A third graduate student, Hien, introduced students to the comic-making software program ToonDoo [www.toondoo.com] and facilitated a digital writing workshop where students designed simple, original web-based comic strips. As a culminating project for the entire unit, students were asked to write a short, original sequential art mini-narrative, using whichever compositional medium (i.e., paper/pencil, ToonDoo, etc.) they preferred.

Data that were collected within the aforementioned graduate and junior high school courses included: a) filmed observations of all graduate course sessions; b) copies of the informal notes/reflections and formal assignments completed and submitted by graduate students as part of the requirements of that course; c) recorded interviews with graduate students before and after their teaching field experience; d) filmed observations of all lessons facilitated at the junior high school by graduate students; e) copies of formal assignments completed and submitted by the junior high school students as part of the requirements of their course; f) interviews with the junior high school students following the completion of the graphic novel unit; and h) field notes taken while I observed and/or analyzed all of the aforementioned activities and artifacts.
The final design of the inquiry emerged holistically and naturally during the process of the study. The data was analyzed using a constructivist approach within a case study model of research. I explored how the central phenomenon of interest – effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives – works in a classroom, and my research found that the process requires the following key instructional elements: visual literacy modeling, mentor texts, collaboration, creative composition, transmediation, and gradual release of (instructor) responsibility.

A thorough review of the foundational literature required for discussion of those elements can be found in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. A detailed description of the research methodology employed in the study can be found in Chapter 3. An analysis of the critical cases that informed my findings can be found in Chapter 4. Answers to the study’s research questions are explored in Chapter 5. And a concise discussion of the pedagogical theory that emerged, the implications of the research, and opportunities for future study can be found in Chapter 6.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual/Verbal Thinking
Sequential Art Narratives: Concepts and Vocabulary
Sequential Art Narrative Instruction
Effective Pedagogy for Teaching New Literacies
  Creative Composition
  Media Literacy
  Gradual Release of Instructional Responsibility
Conclusion of the Literature Review

This research study examines the impact that various instructional strategies have on teaching students to effectively read and compose sequential art narratives, ultimately seeking to develop a theoretical framework for best instructional practices associated with the medium. It focuses on the experiences of six graduate students learning to read, write, and teach graphic novels and on the twelve junior high school students whom they had the opportunity to instruct within a four-week field experience setting that sought to introduce the medium. This chapter will review the prevailing professional research related to the topic of inquiry.

Existing research on literacy and learning through sequential art narratives is scarce; current research focused on the use of comics in education generally only offers descriptions of specific graphic novels with recommendations for their use across the curriculum (Schwartz 2004, Carter 2007) or discusses ways in which the medium may
engage and support struggling readers in a remediation capacity (Crawford 2004, Carey 2004). Carter (2007) acknowledged the need for expanded study in his own literature review, writing that “more research needs to be conducted on almost every aspect of using graphic novels for enhancing literacy [...]. More success stories are needed, particularly via practitioner-based essays detailing use of graphic novels in actual classrooms” (pp. 20-21).

In the absence of existing research that examines methods for effectively teaching sequential art narratives, this study was designed in a manner that allowed me to research the impact that various instructional approaches commonly used with other types of texts had on students’ literacy experiences with this particular medium. The findings of this study will explain in what ways the field cases uphold and in what ways they challenge or require adapted thinking about how those pedagogical decisions impact the effective development of reading and composition skills as they relate specifically to sequential art narratives.

The purpose of this chapter is therefore to: 1) examine the interaction between visual and verbal forms of thinking; 2) establish an understanding of the literacy concepts and technical vocabulary related to the unique compositional nature of sequential art narratives; 3) discuss the existing body of research regarding sequential art
narrative instruction; and 4) review the professional literature
associated with the various instructional strategies that are generally
considered effective for teaching students to read and write within a
new medium.

**Visual/Verbal Thinking**

Thought and language are intrinsically intertwined, symbiotically
shaping each other in a dialectical process throughout a person’s
individual experience and within the context of his social environment,
which in turn is both culturally and individually relative (Vygotsky 124-
153). Concepts are acquired through both conscious instruction from
and unconscious interaction with others, as is the language a person
uses to signify and describe those concepts, and individuals add,
eliminate, or refashion the elements of their language as dictated by
the changing need of their surroundings (146-148). Vygotsky writes,
“Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence
through them. Every thought tends to connect something with
something else, to establish a relationship between things” (125). An
individual’s inner thinking takes shape in the form of verbal language,
and words are both enhanced and complicated by the unique cultural
and historical context an individual associates with them. Speaking is
symbiotically related to thinking.
However, perceiving is also symbiotically related to thinking; an individual cannot separate his inner thoughts from visualizations of the same concept which have been generated from a lifetime of exposure to visual stimuli associated with that concept in the physical world, and therefore the same aforementioned enculturation principles that apply to verbal language also apply to visual imagery (Arnheim 13-53). Arnheim writes, “The mind, reaching far beyond the stimuli received by the eyes directly and momentarily, operates with the vast range of imagery available through memory and organizes a total lifetime’s experience into a system of visual concepts” (105). Visual perception is therefore “not a passive recording of stimulus material but an active concern of the mind” that operates selectively and requires active thinking and problem-solving (37).

Neither verbal perception nor visual perception precedes one another in influencing thought; both are cognitive competencies that work independently yet synchronously and symbiotically to help an individual make sense of the world around him and to communicate that thinking in a way that can be understood by others (Gardner 63-74). The various interplay between visual and verbal modes of thinking can be explained by Paivio’s and Sadoski’s empirically-grounded, unified theory of cognition known as Dual Coding Theory. The underlying principle within this theory is that cognition in reading
and writing consists of the activity of two separate systems for coding our experience – one specialized for language and one specialized for nonverbal stimuli – and that “all meaning and knowledge is explained through the activity within or interconnections between the modality-specific representations in the two systems” (2013, p. 29).

For example, within the visual sensory modality, there are both verbal encodings (mental representations of visual language) known as logogens and nonverbal encodings (mental representations of visual objects) known as imagens (Sadoski & Paivio 2013, p. 34). The verbal and nonverbal systems are separate and distinct (for instance, logogens tend to have a more sequential hierarchy that guides thought in predictably structured ways while imagens tend to have a more synchronous hierarchy that allows thought to move fluidly among their various parts and wholes), but both systems are “capable of operating independently (activity in one but not the other), in parallel (separate activity in both at the same time), or in an interconnected way through referential processing (36). Though a degree of disruption or interference occurs when attempting to perform two different tasks in one modality (31), such as processing visual language and visual imagery simultaneously, “complementary material processed by both the verbal and nonverbal codes has a general advantage [in terms of
its capacity for comprehension] over material processed in the verbal code alone” (104).

It is not coincidental, then, that the earliest written languages in ancient human civilizations were highly pictorial in nature, seeking to maximize comprehension by merging visual and verbal methods of communication. Yet over time, art and written language have become more divergent in order to maximize the range of human expression. This phenomenon can perhaps best be understood by examining the relationship between written language and recorded images, which represent opposite ends of a spectrum of iconography, the use of images to represent ideas or concrete aspects of the physical world (McCloud 26-51).

In Figure 1, McCloud illustrates this spectrum by tracing the progression of a single concept (“face”) across it (49).

Figure 1 – Iconography Spectrum
On one end of the spectrum lies a visual depiction of the subject that is highly representational of the way the subject appears in the physical world (in Figure 1, a photograph of a particular man’s face); viewers universally receive this message and understand what it is communicating. But as the face moves across the spectrum it becomes more generalized...the realistic picture becomes a series of simplified iconographic imitations of the photo...then the icons lose their pictorial nature altogether and become letters composing the word ‘face’...then ‘face’ is defined through a series of concrete written language (“two eyes, one nose, one mouth”)...and finally it is described using abstract written language (“The youth’s proud livery, so gaz’d on now...”) that requires a level of specialized perception on the part of the reader in order to comprehend its meaning.

A similar spectrum exists for any concept that an individual might come to know and wish to communicate with others, and the manner in which he/she communicates (purely-visual versus purely-verbal versus some visual-verbal combination of both forms) will directly impact the manner in which the message is received and the amount of perception required on the part of the receiver. The further a message moves to the right of the spectrum (from a realistic visual portrayal to an iconographic visual portrayal to a concrete verbal portrayal to an abstract verbal portrayal) the less objective and
specific the message becomes and the more open to interpretation on
the part of the receiver (McCloud 48-51).

Yet no matter where a written message falls on the spectrum, it
is always communicated visually and symbolically, relying on one or
more icons to represent its meaning. Alfred Korzybski wrote in 1933
that “the word is not the thing,” in reference to the inability of
language to ever fully replicate the real-world experience it is
describing; Rene Magritte painted The Treachery of Images in 1929 to
illustrate that a painting of an object, no matter how realistically
rendered, will always be a mere representation of that object. Indeed,
at no point in McCloud’s aforementioned example is the man’s face
ever actually present; instead, there are a range of visually symbolic
depictions of the man’s face, in both pictorial and verbal forms,
establishing a “ladder of abstraction” (Hayakawa 1939) whereby the
original, real-life object (the man’s face) is portrayed in a fashion
somewhere between highly concrete (the photo representation) or
highly abstract (the poetic verse representation), with an increasing
number of characteristics unique to the original concept being left out
as the symbolic representation becomes further abstracted.

In varying contexts, any of these representations may be
preferred. Korzybski also wrote, “A map is not the territory it
represents, but if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory,
which accounts for its usefulness” (1933). If eliminating ambiguity is the primary goal of communication in a given circumstance, then highly realistic visual representations of a topic are ideal because they provide the most concrete manifestation of that topic in the mind of the viewer. However, creating highly realistic visual representations of a topic may be time-consuming or require advanced technical skills or equipment, and therefore simpler pictorial representations or purely verbal representations may be employed for the sake of efficiency.

When communication is being used for more aesthetic or philosophical purposes (such as literature or visual art), though, abstracted representations of a topic may actually be favored due to their ability to engage the recipient at a higher conceptual level that will allow for increased generalization. For example, McCloud argues that cartoons are a form of “amplification through simplification” because they focus the viewer’s attention on broad ideas that are universal in nature rather than on the specific pictorial details of a particular context: “when we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). Verbal language works in a similar manner; the extent to which word choice is generalized and abstracted (as opposed to sensory and
specific) will increasingly liberate the reader to form his or her own personalized conceptions of the message rather than ground them in the specific contexts in which they are encountered (Hayakawa 1939).

Context is therefore another important dimension of visual and/or verbal literacy. Benjamin Whorf writes, “A culture’s experience and perceptions shape its language, and conversely, the language of a culture tends to shape that culture’s experiences and perceptions” (1966). The way in which a visual/verbal text is constructed is shaped by the cultural identity/ideology of the message-sender and the way in which that same visual/verbal text is interpreted is influenced by the cultural identity/ideology of the recipient. A single denoted word or image can have an almost endless array of connotations depending on the prior experiences of the recipient, because cultures (macro, micro, and individual) have varying value structures and perceptions of concepts like time, proxemics, ethics, etc. (Hall 1959, 1976).

However, the message-sender may often utilize words/images without thinking about the way that those words/images may be perceived by other audiences. This is especially problematic for visual texts, because “images and objects present opinions as if they were truth, reinforce attitudes, and confirm or deny beliefs and values. If the messages carried by visual culture are not interpreted, we will be
unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree” (Barrett 2003).

Barrett speaks to the importance of developing a capacity for critical literacy within humans. In “Politics of the English Language,” George Orwell argues that since thought affects language, language too can affect thought, and therefore language that is generic (pretentious, ambiguous, cliché, jargon, or slang – later dubbed by Orwell as Doublespeak) can be used as a proxy for independent thinking, reducing users to mindless puppets of those who control such language (1950). The same is true of images, too. ‘Symbolspeak’ is “the skillful manipulation of ambiguity in images to distort reality” causing the viewer to feel like he/she is constructing his/her own meaning when, in fact, the viewer is being manipulated to experience certain emotional reactions that will overwhelm any cognizant thinking on the matter (Fox 1994). Research has shown that visual texts’ capacity to quickly relay highly sensory information without the need for high levels of perception on the part of the recipient make visual texts especially effective at communicating on a sub-conscious level by evoking emotional versus intellectual responses (Karl 1994).

Visual/verbal texts attempt to influence the thinking and reactions of readers through the use of particular compositional techniques. For example, visual advertisements often display Hugh
Rank’s persuasion schema (1976) by intensifying the desirable appeal of their product/service through repetition and favorable associations and by downplaying undesirable aspects of their product/service through omission, diversion, and confusion. Underlying both of these approaches are strategic composition choices involving the location of images on the page, the salience (degree of eye-catching attractiveness) of those images, and the framing (connectivity versus separation of elements) of the piece, all of which work in unison to subconsciously associate feelings of prominence or unimportance with each individual component of the advertisement (Van Leeuwen 1996).

As technology has and continues to afford humans the ability to efficiently create and produce new types of texts in increasingly multimodal ways, it is important to study the unique compositional properties of each specialized type of text, particularly in terms of how their visual and verbal elements interact. Shlain writes, “Information comes in multiple forms, and ... each form of communication has its own rules and grammar” (2005). Furthermore, the medium in which that communication is sent significantly influences the way the message is received, biasing certain senses and affecting the amount of effort a reader/viewer must exert to understand what they are observing (McLuhan 1964). For the purposes of this study, it is
therefore important to investigate the visual/verbal attributes of sequential art narratives as their own form of media.

**Sequential Art Narratives: Concepts and Vocabulary**

Sequential art narratives are a type of text with unique visual/verbal properties and are defined as “juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the [reader]” (McCloud 6). They can be as short as a single panel comic strip or as long as a graphic novel, and despite the way they have historically been pigeon-holed in America, they may focus on a limitless variety of content. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud remarks, “The art form – the medium – known as comics is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images. The “content” of those images and ideas is, of course, up to creators, and we all have different tastes...the trick is to never mistake the message for the messenger” (6).

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Will Eisner argues that what distinguishes sequential art narratives from other visual texts is the unique manner in which the medium often superimposes art and written language, requiring both verbal and visual interpretative skills from readers that require analogous thought processes and skillsets (10). Though there are a number of media that rely on meaning-
making to occur from both visual and verbal elements, sequential art narratives are distinctive in the way they record visual-verbal interactions in a print format and then juxtapose various visual-verbal exchanges in different spaces within the same overarching plane/page, sequencing a series of those juxtaposed visual-verbal exchanges across the text as a whole. McCloud describes this dynamic by stating, “Comics offer range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word” (212).

Sequential art narratives therefore have a unique compositional nature and, accordingly, a distinguishing set of conceptual principles and technical vocabulary that are integral to fully understanding the medium. I have annotated Figure 2 - SAN Illustration: "A Friendly Reminder" (a single comic strip from the PhD Comics web series by Jorge Cham [2015]) and Figure 3 – SAN Illustration: The Arrival (a sample page from the graphic novel by Shaun Tan [2007]) to provide common visual reference points by which to define and discuss these terms and concepts.
The basic compositional unit within a sequential art narrative is called a *panel*; it is a picture (with related verbal text) that represents a distinct time and space within the narrative and is often framed by a border. Panels can range in size and style, and there may be any number of visual and verbal elements within a single panel. Individual panels are laid out next to each other on the page, which itself becomes an overarching *meta-panel* composed of the smaller, juxtaposed individual panels. “In comics, there are actually two frames: the total page, on which there are any number of panels, and the panel itself, within which the narrative action unfolds” (Eisner 41).

Most Western sequential art narratives are read one panel at a time, from left to right and top to bottom across the page/meta-panel. Figure 2 illustrates a simplistic approach to paneling where four identically-sized panels comprise a single horizontal progression across
the meta-panel. Figure 3 below, however, depicts a more sophisticated approach to paneling that uses both the horizontal and vertical planes of the meta-panel and includes a panel (#4) that is significantly larger than the other panels on the page, drawing particular emphasis to its content and likely resulting in the reader spending a longer amount of time analyzing it.

Figure 3 – SAN Illustration: *The Arrival*
Indeed, the size, shape, positioning and number of panels in a sequential art narrative directly impact the reading experience. Eisner writes, “A frame’s shape (or the absence of one) gives it the ability to become more than just a proscenium through which a comic’s action is seen: it becomes part of the story itself” (45). This is largely due to the impact that paneling has upon closure during the reading process.

_Closure_ refers to the ability for viewers to observe individual parts of a text while perceiving the overall whole they comprise. “The closure of electronic media [like film or television] is continuous, largely involuntary and virtually imperceptible” (McCloud 68) but this is less the case in sequential art narratives, whose print nature requires readers to be a “willing and conscious collaborator” (65). Closure actively occurs in sequential art narratives as readers “fill in” the space between panels (known as the _gutter_, as marked in Figure 2) with their own individualized interpretations of meaning; readers infer what happens in the gutter even though it is not explicitly illustrated in the text. For example, in Figure 2, readers understand that the changes in setting, action, and character attire depicted in each of the four panels imply that a significant amount of time is passing between each panel without actually showing all the specific events that occur during that timeframe (though it can be assumed all
of those events also fall into the same “I should be writing” category, adding humor to the strip’s punchline).

Closure is therefore the agent of change, time, and motion in sequential art narratives. McCloud writes, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67). Transitions between panels can move readers from scene-to-scene as they do in Figure 2, or from action-to-action (panels #1-3 in Figure 3) or aspect-to-aspect (panels #4-6 in Figure 3) or subject-to-subject (panels #6-9 in Figure 3) within the same scene, or can be non-sequitur, offering no overtly logical relationship between panels whatsoever (McCloud 70-72). Regardless of the type of closure occurring, however, it is in “the limbo of the gutter [that] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (McCloud 66). And it is the number, size, and shape of panels on the page that accordingly creates a sense of rhythm in a sequential art narrative (Eisner 30).

Sequential art narratives, then, are unique in the way they allow for readers to experience time and space. In purely verbal texts, the lack of visual iconography forces the reader to perceive the narrative in a sentence-by-sentence fashion, while in electronic multimedia
formats, each image is constantly and quickly being replaced by the next image in the sequence, leaving no record of the narrative outside the present moment. But in sequential art narratives, while each panel being read at any given point in time represents the present moment in the narrative, the immediate past and immediate future (or, in some cases, parallel actions occurring within the same present moment) are simultaneously perceptible to readers who cannot help but absorb the visual aspects of the other panels that comprise the meta-panel of the page. McCloud writes, “Unlike other media, in comics, the past is more than just memories for the audience and the future is more than just possibilities. Both past and future are real and visible and all around us! Wherever your eyes are focused, that’s NOW. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of past and future!” (104).

In Figure 2, this time/space awareness phenomenon allows readers to perceive the magnitude of which the guilt surrounding “I should be writing” has pervaded every aspect of the protagonist’s life, both before, during, and after reading the short strip. In Figure 3, as the reader turns to this page in the novel, he/she is struck with an overall sense of homesickness before carefully analyzing the individual actions (panels) that the protagonist is taking while moving into his new apartment in a foreign land.
Yet just as panels and the gutters between them create the illusion of time through closure, a sense of time also transpires within each panel itself. One way that time elapses within a panel is through the incorporation of visual imagery that suggests a duration of moments are occurring simultaneously within a single static image. This sensation is most apparent when *motion lines* are employed, abstract streaks that appear behind an illustrated moving object that represents the trajectory in which the object has moved; in the process, motion lines also suggests the amount of time that has elapsed from the beginning and end of the action. The incorporation of multiple interacting images within a single panel create a similar effect; though it is not physically possible for all events to truly be coexisting within the same “snapshot” in time, the reader is able to perceive the entire arc of the sequence as one cohesive action bound together by the panel (McCloud 101). Additionally, the size and shape of a panel itself can also make a difference in the reader’s perception of time (as previously discussed in relation to Figure 3’s panel #4), analogous to the way that musical notes on a score dictate varying intervals of duration.

Just as a single panel can represent a span of time through visual imagery, so too can a panel represent a span of time through sound. In the non-audio medium of sequential art narratives, sound is
created through the employment of verbal text, typically using one of the following symbolic icons (as referenced in Figure 2): a *text balloon* indicates sound that is spoken out loud by a character, a *thought bubble* indicates language that is internally being considered by a character, and a *narration box* indicates language being communicated by a written text within the narrative or by an omniscient narrator. The amount of verbal text within a panel proportionately increases the duration in which the panel is read. When multiple text balloons, bubbles, or boxes are used within the same panel, the time that elapses within that panel is expanded to encompass the length of the dialogue (Eisner 30). For example, while panels #1-3 in Figure 2 indicate a moment in time that lasts only as long as it takes to read the phrase “I should be writing,” panel #4 lasts twice as long (despite being drawn to the same scale) because it includes the text of the professor’s friendly reminder email as well as the protagonist’s internal response to that email. Multiple text balloons, bubbles, or boxes are read one at a time from left to right, top to bottom across the panel.

The incorporation of verbal text in sequential art narratives offers more than just the ability to convey sound and time, however; it also creates an opportunity to simultaneously engage the reader in two varying modalities of literacy that can interact in unique ways while developing the narrative experience. McCloud writes, “In comics
at its best, words and pictures are like partners in a dance where each one takes turns leading. / When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area. / On the other hand, if the words lock in the ‘meaning’ of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off” (156-59).

There are various ways in which pictures and words can combine in a particular panel of a sequential art narrative. At opposite ends of the spectrum are word-specific combinations, where pictures merely serve to illustrate what is already being described verbally, and picture-specific combinations, where words do little more than add a “sound track” to a story that can be visually understood without them. Between these extremes, though, are interdependent combinations where words and pictures work symbiotically to communicate an idea that neither can convey alone. Figure 2 features panels with interdependent visual/verbal combinations (the visuals provide the context of each setting while the verbal mantra “I should be writing” is the central idea that unites the scenes); in contrast, Figure 3 features panels with purely picture-specific combinations. Though the following approaches are used less often, it is also possible for words and pictures to highlight completely divergent narratives through parallel combinations or for words to become integral components of the picture through montage combinations (McCloud 153-154).
As authors of sequential art narratives consider the manner in which they want to combine pictures and words within a panel, they must also consider the aforementioned principle of closure in order to determine which details to include within a panel and which elements to leave to the reader's own personal interpretation within the gutters surrounding that panel. This process of selecting specific visual and verbal components to include within a particular panel and determining the manner in which they will be depicted is called encapsulation.

Eisner asserts that encapsulation encompasses the selection of:

a) content - the elements necessary to the narration; b) perspective - the visual vantage point from which the reader is allowed to see the content; c) framing - the portion of each content element to be included in the panel; and d) posture - the manner in which each content element is "frozen in time," selected out of a sequence of possible related movements in a single action (39-42). Compositional decisions regarding perspective, framing, and posture impact the way in which readers perceive the panel; in Figure 4, Eisner provides examples that demonstrate how the same narrative content can be experienced in significantly different ways due to shifts in how it is visually encapsulated; a reader can be made to feel safe or threatened through perspective, can have his or her attention drawn to specific details through framing, and can have particular narrative moments
dictated in a uniform visual manner through posturing while related moments are left to the reader’s uniquely personal imagination.

Figure 4 – Encapsulation Principles

PERSPECTIVE

FRAMING

POSTURE
Paneling, closure, visual/verbal combinations, and encapsulation comprise the structure of sequential art narratives; as the backbone of the text, they are often first presented in a dummy draft, a rough sketch conceptual layout that allows for revisions to be made to the text before more time-intensive visual stylistic treatments are applied. Figure 5 compares the dummy draft and final draft of the same page of *Houdini: The Handcuff King* by Jason Lutes and Nick Bertozzi (2008).

Figure 5: Dummy Draft Example
As the differences between the dummy draft and final draft in Figure 5 help to illustrate, structural elements like encapsulation and paneling are not the only compositional techniques that influence the reading experience within sequential art narratives; the following stylistic elements are equally impactful: A) *Lettering* - the process of writing verbal text by hand or applying particular typeface; variations in lettering can convey distinctive verbal tones or draw emphasis when words are read; B) *Coloring* – the decisions to lighten or shade and/or to incorporate colors of varying vividness within elements of the text to manipulate mood or convey symbolism; C) *Cartooning* – the choice to portray particular content elements in a more abstracted and iconic manner in order to make them more subjective and universally recognizable; and D) *Expressive Illustration* – the use of particular styles of drawing/inking (the angles, curves, and thickness of lines) to evoke an emotional or sensual response (Eisner 8, 24-26, 103-114; McCloud 28-31, 51-59, 124-126, 132-137, 185-192).

In 1985, Eisner wrote that sequential art narratives comprise “a medium more demanding of diverse skills and intellect than either I or my contemporaries fully appreciated” (6). The complexity of this unique type of visual-verbal text continues to evolve as authors develop innovative ways to stretch the medium. However, the structural principles of paneling, closure, visual-verbal interaction, and
encapsulation and the stylistic principles of lettering, coloring, cartooning, and expressive illustration are imperative to fully understanding sequential art narratives.

**Sequential Art Narrative Instruction**

The increased prevalence of sequential art narratives in libraries and classrooms across the world has led educators to compile a limited though growing body of academic research surrounding the rationale for inclusion of sequential art narratives in instructional settings, the impacts of reading sequential art narratives on literacy development, and investigations into effective pedagogies for teaching sequential art narratives.

A limited number of studies actually pre-date the manufactured crisis that comics suffered at the hands of Frederic Wertham in 1954 that led to their significant diminishment in educational settings for several decades that followed. Prior to the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* and the related Congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency, comics were actually widely read by most young Americans in the 1940s and were beginning to be incorporated into educational curriculum across subject areas in that era (Yang 2003).

An early research study investigated the effectiveness of comics versus non-visual printed texts in terms of students’ ability to recall
information from their reading (Sones 1944). Four-hundred middle school students coded to three varying ability groups were assessed on their ability to answer knowledge-based questions about Clara Barton after reading either/both print or sequential art biographies about her life. Students in both the “low” and “average” ability groups were able to successfully retain more information after reading the comic book than the purely verbal biography.

A larger research study sought to understand how educators were using comics in their classrooms and what perceived impacts they were having on students (Hutchinson 1949). Over two thousand teachers across 27 states were issued a manual that described how comics could be used to help teach their curriculum; 13 weeks later, 438 teachers returned questionnaires about their usage experiences. Reading comprehension and vocabulary development were the areas in which comics were found to be used most successfully, and a majority of participating teachers also attributed student motivational benefits to their incorporation of comics, including increased participation in reading and better student-teacher relationships. However, some participating teachers reported unfavorable reactions to the usage of comics in their classroom, citing a lack of time or curricular compatibility, issues with parental misperceptions, and worries over the academic seriousness of the medium.
These latter sentiments, unfortunately, foreshadowed the way in which public perceptions of sequential art narratives would largely be framed for the rest of the century, due to similar and expanded criticisms raised by Dr. Frederic Wertham in his 1954 publication, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Though his methodology was highly suspect, Wertham claimed that reading comics had a detrimental impact on children that over time caused illiteracy, juvenile delinquency, and abnormal sexual behavior (Hatfield 2000). His work received national recognition/validation due to his role as an expert witness in Congressional hearings on juvenile delinquency during the McCarthy era, and as a direct result, the reputation of comics became badly slandered and virtually all research related to the educational value of comics ceased to exist for several decades.

As public and educator perceptions slowly began to warm to the sequential art medium again following the publication and critical successes of the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Maus* (Spiegelman 1986) and Hugo-award-winning *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibbons 1986), the academic scholarship that resumed primarily centered on rationales and justifications for re-incorporating comics into educational settings.

Sequential art narratives are of high interest to students due to their visual nature and more likely to be read at home for leisure than more traditional print texts (Lyga & Lyga 2004). “By combining image
and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read” (Yang 2008, p. 187). The familiar visual nature of the texts helps readers to feel more confident and find more relevance while reading about complex concepts or issues (Gorman 2003). In a longitudinal study of male reading habits, Smith & Wilhelm (2002) found this visual enticement especially true among male readers; graphic novels were one of the few types of texts that consistently engaged male readers.

Research also shows that students who read graphic novels tend to read more traditional print books overall and have more positive attitudes about reading than students who don’t read graphic novels, illustrating the capacity that the sequential art narratives possess for becoming a gateway to other types of reading (Krashen 2004; Seyfried 2008). Furthermore, comics demonstrate this motivation potential across ability levels, attracting both skilled readers and struggling readers in equal measure (Serchey 2008).

Yet sequential art narratives are especially beneficial for English language learners, providing visual contexts for written language that is particularly helpful for navigating popular American idioms and colloquialisms (Cary 2004; Liu 2004). This leads to increased confidence in ELL students and an increased willingness to engage in other literacy work (Duad 2011; Iwahori 2008).
Struggling readers who are native to English-speaking find similar success with sequential art narratives. A large majority of teachers who incorporate graphic novels into their classroom report that below-grade-level readers are significantly more engaged and successful when reading graphic novels compared to traditional texts due to the contextual clues provided by the visual nature of sequential art narratives (Annett 2008). Students who read comics in educational settings self-report similar outcomes. Urban, low-performing 4th-8th grade students reported better comprehension and an increased ability to successfully read independently as a result of extended participation in an after-school Comic Book Project that facilitated reading and composition of original comics (Bitz 2004). This growth is likely due, in part, to the fact that graphic novels introduce twice as many words as the average children’s book (Weiner 2003) and that comics’ coupling of sophisticated word choice with visual scaffolding is beneficial to student vocabulary acquisition (Krashen 2004, Carter & Evensen 2011).

Using sequential art narratives with students leads to similar gains in the improvement of student writing skills. Fisher and Frey (2004) found that after using a graphic novel with high school students over the course of a month, student writing exhibited growth as measured by increased mean sentence length, an increase in
complex sentence usage (i.e. multiple ideas per sentence), and the skillful incorporation of dialogue. Similar growth was experienced in the aforementioned Comic Book Project (Bitz 2004) and by students who worked to create their own comics in a Social Studies classroom (Morrison, Bryan & Chilcoat 2002).

Finally, sequential art narratives have also proven to help develop students’ visual literacy skills. Graphic novels invite students to analyze how authors/illustrators use various visual elements to shape and stylize their stories in addition to verbal applications of literary analysis with which students are more likely familiar (McPherson 2006). Reading sequential art narratives requires the use of multiple literacies at once in a manner that mirrors, and thus better prepares students for, the multimodal demands of the real world (Schwarz 2006). Schlain writes, “Bombarded with a wide variety of images regularly, students need sharp visual-interpretation skills to interact with the media analytically. Each form of communication has its own rules and grammar and should be taught in ways that lead students to be more purposeful, specific, and concise in communicating” (2005).

As the aforementioned research base has established an increasingly strong rationale for the utilization of sequential art narratives in instructional settings, the focus of scholarship has begun
to shift in recent years to the question of how pragmatically to accomplish this goal.

A number of specific case studies of various practitioners using specific sequential art texts within their classrooms have emerged. In *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*, Dr. James Bucky Carter (2007) edited a collection of articles that illustrate thematic connections between particular graphic novels and traditional prose texts taught in common 9-12 Language Arts curricula. Carter also organized the development of a digital database with educational rationales (synopses, critiques, ideas for implementation, etc.) for over 100 distinguished graphic novels. Nancy Frey and Doug Fisher edited a collection of articles entitled *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comics Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills* (2008). And Stephen Tabachnick collected and edited 34 essays related to teaching the graphic novel at the university level (2009). The vast majority of these writings provide compelling case studies of innovative and successful approaches to teaching specific graphic novels in the classroom, but generally do not discuss the pedagogical methodologies used in helping students maximally engage the visual medium as a whole.
A handful of instructional guides for teaching graphic novels in K-12 settings have been published in recent years promising pragmatic easy-to-follow, ready-to-use activities for the classroom. These guides vary in content and approach – one offers generic lessons for applying traditional literacy techniques to comics (Monnin 2009), another gives assignments and discussion prompts for specific graphic novels (Novak 2014), and several provide templates for having students create their own short sequential art narrative texts (Carter 2009, Bitz 2010), but these texts do not delve much into theory and leave many unanswered questions about genuine differences in approach that might exist between reading and writing traditional prose stories versus reading and writing visual narratives.

Only one known study in the current body of academic research related to sequential art narratives specifically investigates techniques used by educators to provide instruction for graphic novels. Doug Annett (2008) interviewed six teachers (across middle school, high school, or the university) who used comics or graphic novels in their classes. The interviews revealed that the teachers all: (a) provided a general overview of vocabulary and concepts related to graphic novels to their students (using several of the academic resources previously cited), (b) asked students to identify those SAN concepts within the graphic novels they were reading; (c) led students in a traditional
literary analysis of the graphic novel, examining concepts such as plot, setting, characterization, or theme; and (d) required students to create their own visual texts as a culminating assessment. Some of the participating teachers additionally (e) explicitly taught students visual analysis techniques from the fields of art and film studies.

Annett’s study provides a useful foundation for theorizing the various pedagogical elements that might be impactful upon student learning in regard to sequential art narratives, but it merely reports the various instructional actions that teachers who incorporate graphic novels into their curriculum have taken and stops short of critically evaluating the effectiveness of those actions. Further research is needed in this area, and my research study was designed to extend and deepen that understanding.

**Effective Pedagogy for Teaching New Literacies**

Due to the lack of research regarding how to most effectively teach sequential art narratives, it was useful in designing my research study to also investigate related fields of academic literature to ascertain what pedagogical strategies are suggested best practices for instruction within any generic new literacy. The following areas were influential to the theoretical foundations of my research design.
I) Creative Composition

In their article, “Media Literacy: A National Priority for a Changing World,” Thoman and Jolls describe the vastly diverse ways in which information is rapidly communicated in the 21st century and argue that in such a multimedia-saturated culture, “the content of a specific media message is no longer all that relevant. It’s only one of thousands received every day. What is important is facility with analyzing new information as it’s received, evaluating it against one’s prior knowledge, formulating a response and ultimately communicating to others your decision or point of view” (2004, p. 2). In short: humans today need to be able to read, write, and think in varied and ever-adapting ways.

As educators seek to prepare students to prosper in this ever-changing world, they must expose students to new forms of literacy, and in doing so, the goal should not just be that students can comprehend information presented in an unfamiliar medium; teachers should also seek to empower students to be able to use that medium to create and distribute their own communication with real-world audiences. A 2003 report from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills asserts that, “As the world grows increasingly complex, success and prosperity will be linked to people’s ability to think, act, adapt, and communicate creatively” (p. 10). New literacy instruction should
situate students as both readers and composers of new media. Fisher, Frey, and Gonzalez write that to prepare students for this ‘literacy 2.0’, “we need to equip students with the cognitive tools that allow them to produce and share knowledge – using sounds, images, and text – and the technological tools that provide them the means to do so.” (2010, p. 72).

A simultaneous, reciprocal approach to reading and writing instruction within a new literacy leads to gains in both competencies. When students are asked to create original compositions within a medium at the same time they are reading published texts within that medium, they begin to read those texts from the vantage point of a writer, which makes them more likely to notice elements of craft and ask questions about an author’s compositional decisions than they would otherwise. In Crafting Digital Writing, Troy Hicks writes, “Even the most skilled readers among our students may not have all the lenses they need to see the ways in which an author constructs a text” (2013, p. 12); but by positioning students as fellow writers within the medium, they are given a new purpose for reading that opens up new ways of understanding the text. “A student who starts reading like a writer can, with our guidance, begin turning in to the craft – the how – of the text being read. When we help students get a feel for [elements
Indeed, once a student begins viewing the texts that he or she is reading within a certain medium or genre as potential “mentor texts” by which to glean insights into the outcomes that various compositional decisions can have on readers, the student is more likely to produce stronger, varied writing him/herself. In Wondrous Words, Katie Wood Ray offers the following technique: “We have to work backwards from what we see in a finished text to what we imagine the writer did to make it come out that way” (1999, p. 28). Kelly Gallagher suggests that students tangibly keep running notes of what they notice authors doing while reading mentor texts; he writes, “when students create maps to understand how the professional writer tackled the writing task, they begin to understand how to approach the task on their own” (2006, p. 82).

Gallagher also advocates that teachers present themselves as writers within the medium or genre being studied. “When the teacher becomes a writing model by actually writing alongside the students, many benefits, for both teachers and students, emerge (p. 48)” such as better understanding of the task, more focused/meaningful instruction, demystification of the writing process and its challenges/complexities, and a clearer sense of how learning will be
assessed. In *After "The End": Teaching and Learning Creative Revision*, Barry Lane reinforces this concept, writing, “traditionally, teachers have modeled perfection and students have struggled to meet [these] standards. Today, as teachers move toward individualized instruction and collaborative learning, students struggle to create and meet their own standards of excellence; teachers are learning to model the struggle” (1992, p. 6).

By positioning themselves and their students as creative writers within a new medium and by positioning a variety of professionally published works as mentor texts by which students can consider the impact that compositional choices have on readers’ experiences, teachers create a learning environment that is more conducive to helping students better understand a new literacy than if reading or writing within that medium were taught in isolation. Thoman and Jolls write, “The best way to understand how media are put together is to do just that – make a video, create a website, develop an ad campaign. The more real world the project is, the better” (1994, p.7). New literacy pedagogy that features creative composition as a foundational component to its instructional design will likely yield more successful learning outcomes for students and an increased likelihood of the ability to become an independently proficient user of the new literacy in question.
II) *Media Literacy*

Marshall McLuhan famously mused, “The medium is the message” (1994). This alliterative catch phrase asserts that the method of communication an individual uses has a significant impact upon the manner in which the messages contained within that text are received and interpreted by readers.

The Center for Media Literacy lists as one of its core concepts that “media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules” (Thoman & Jolls, 2004, p.7). Different media have different manners in which readers interact within them, often with profoundly different physiological and metacognitive impacts on the reader. This allows for writers within each medium to use varying creative techniques by which to attract or downplay readers’ attention and to manipulate the pace at which a text is read, the mood that it projects, or the points of view that are privileged within it.

Given the unique attributes that different forms of composition possess, a common instructional approach is to have students study a particular medium or genre in-depth, on its own, by learning to read (and create) a variety of texts within that medium or genre. Fountas and Pinnell explain:

By genre study, we mean more than just learning the specific characteristics of each genre. We mean helping
students learn how to learn about genre from other writers – how to study the way writers use craft and conventions in communicating meaning to their readers. Students think about the writer’s purpose and audience and notice the features that help the writer achieve an effective communication (2012, p.7)

Students begin to develop an in-depth understanding of the craft and conventions within a particular medium when given the opportunity to juxtapose a variety of diverse texts written within that medium.

However, another method for helping students to better understand the manner in which a particular medium works is to have them compare and contrast the way an identical message is communicated across different media. Transmediation is “taking understandings from one [semiotic] system and moving them into another sign system” (Siegel, 1995). For example, a student might be asked to take a prose short story and transform it into a short video or to listen to a song and create a visual painting that matches its tone and themes. In doing so, students learn about the opportunities and limitations posed by each medium used.

“Transmediation is a syntactic concept that deals with the structure of sign systems and the relationships between them” (Suhor, 1984). It requires critical engagement and active textual analysis
through a multiplicity of perspectives and ways of mediating knowing between sign systems (Seigel, 1995). The process of transmediation forces participants to consider the unique characteristics of a particular medium and, accordingly, the use of both short and sustained transmediation exercises in the classroom has shown to improve students’ ability to read, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of textual environments and multiple sign systems (Semali & Fueyo, 2001).

Another media literacy instructional technique that has proven especially effective for helping individuals become more independently capable of critically analyzing visual texts is the use of VTS, visual thinking strategies. This structured yet open-ended, student-centered approach to discussing art and other visual media originated from research investigating how novice museum patrons might better understand and engage with the exhibits they see. It utilizes a group “problem-solving” process that circularly seeks answers to the following (recurring) cycle of questions: 1) What is going on in this picture? 2) What do you see that makes you say that? 3) What else is going on? (Yenawine, 1998). As participants repeatedly engage in this process, they begin to internalize it, which in turn leads to aesthetic growth as measured by the number and complexity of observations made, the grounding of interpretations to what is actually
depicted in the image, an increased awareness or concern for the artist’s intentions and craft decisions, and meta-strategic transfer of skills to other forms of reading/writing (Housen, 2002).

New literacy pedagogy that features visual thinking strategies, an in-depth study of a new medium through immersion in a diverse set of professional texts within that medium, and opportunities for transmediation across both the new medium and previously familiar media will likely yield more successful learning outcomes for students and an increased likelihood of the ability to become an independently proficient user of the new literacy in question.

III) Gradual Release of Instructional Responsibility

When introducing a new literacy to a heterogeneous group of students, the reality is that its degree of "newness" will likely vary significantly across the population of students with which one is working. Though a majority of students may have had little to no prior sustained literacy experiences with a particular non-traditional medium such as sequential art narratives, there almost certainly will also exist a subset of students with considerable familiarity and prowess with reading or even composing within that medium, and there likely will be a number of students who fall somewhere between those extremes.
This represents an all-too common dilemma for English Language Arts instructors: how to ensure that all students in a particular course develop equitably into better readers/writers when those same students begin the class with vastly different preexisting literacy skillsets, in some cases representing multiple years’ worth of variance in reading/writing habits. The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction offers a solution to this conundrum that has been documented as an effective approach for improving literacy achievement (Fisher & Frey 2007), reading comprehension (Lloyd 2004), and the abilities of English language learners (Kong & Pearson 2003).

The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction requires that the teacher shifts from assuming “all the responsibility for performing a task ... to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility” (Duke & Pearson 2002, p. 211). This shift occurs slowly and deliberately over the course of a particular unit of study. There are four interrelated components to the model that vary in duration within a particular lesson depending on where that lesson is situated in the larger context of the aforementioned shift in instructional responsibility that occurs within the broader unit-at-large (Fisher & Frey 2008):
1) *Focus Lessons* – These whole-class, teacher-directed lessons establish the learning goal(s) and its relevance, provide background knowledge on new concepts, and allow the teacher to model his or her own reading, writing, or thinking practices in relation to a related instructional task.

2) *Guided Instruction* – This teacher-directed instruction is more differentiated and reciprocal in nature than Focus Lessons and is often delivered in small group or individual settings. The teacher uses questioning or facilitation to help students work on customized skills or tasks.

3) *Collaborative Learning* – This student-led instruction features small groups of students working together to discuss ideas or solve problems to clarify their learning, further their individual tasks, and/or to receive immediate feedback from peers.

4) *Independent Work* – This student-led instruction features extended time for students to individually engage in literacy tasks and to apply their own independent skills to any assigned tasks.

All components of the model should ideally be present during any given lesson, but lessons at the beginning of the unit will feature significant portions of teacher-directed instruction, moderate portions
of student collaboration, and minimal student independent work; lessons by the end of the unit will inverse these ratios.

The gradual release of responsibility over the course of the unit helps to ensure that students are supported in their acquisition of new skills and concepts. “Gradual release of responsibility emphasizes instruction that mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise” (Beuhl 2005). In this manner, it is potentially a remedy to the dilemma posed by having a group of students with a widely diverse range of experiences and proficiency within a particular new medium such as sequential art narratives, as it affords students the time and flexibility to engage texts at their current ability level while still providing opportunities to learn from others.

**Conclusion of the Literature Review**

Visual and verbal forms of perception function in distinctive yet symbiotic ways to influence thought and cognition; humans can learn to more effectively communicate when they understand how these dual processes work and interact.

Sequential art narratives are a sophisticated form of visual-verbal text with unique characteristics in regard to the manner in which readers make meaning from them. The juxtaposition of
statically-recorded words and images in deliberate sequence and spacing throughout the text necessitates a distinguishing set of conceptual principles and technical vocabulary by which to fully understand and describe literacy functions within the medium.

A growing body of research finds sequential art narratives to be beneficial in literacy education due to increased student engagement, comprehension, and vocabulary development when reading sequential art texts, increased writing complexity when composing sequential art texts, and increased student awareness of visual literacy concepts when exposed to sequential art texts in either capacity. However, there is very little existing research that examines methods for effectively teaching sequential art narratives.

Instructional strategies that have been found to be effective for teaching students to read and write within other new media include providing guided opportunities for students to compose original texts within the medium in question, teaching students overarching media literacy skills, and using a gradual release of instructional responsibility model for designing and delivering instruction. My research study will investigate the impact that these approaches have on student literacy development within the specific medium of sequential art narratives.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm
Research Settings
Research Participants
Research Procedures
Data Collection
Data Analysis
Quality of Study
Limitations of Study

This research study centered on an examination of how various instructional techniques impact the manner in which students read and compose sequential art narratives. As a researcher, I sought to discover an emerging theory of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction. This chapter will discuss various methodological aspects of the study, including the research model and design, its settings and participants, data collection and analysis procedures, and quality.

Research Paradigm

As an educator, I subscribe to the theory of constructivism – that humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. Learning is an active, social process where dynamic interactions occur between learners, their instructor, and the task at-hand (Vygotsky 1978, Holt and
Willard-Holt 2000). The role of the teacher is to facilitate environments that allow students to arrive at their own understanding of new learning in a manner that befits their own unique set of experiences and values (Gamoran, Secada, and Marrett 1998).

I also embody these beliefs as a researcher; the theories of pedagogy I posit are constructed and generalized from a variety of individual perspectives held by each unique subject in my study. Constructivist researchers seek to understand the complexity of an issue by examining the varied and multiple views held by a diverse group of subjects (Creswell 2007). Extensive amounts of time must be spent by the researcher observing subjects in their natural setting and interviewing subjects “in an effort to reconstruct the constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds” (Hatch 2002, 15).

Constructivist researchers engage in qualitative data collection because of the emphasis it places on how experience pertains to a specific context (Jensen & Jankowski 1991). Analysis of qualitative data is inductive, generative, and subjective, a process of “making sense of field data” in order to discover broader themes (Lindlof 1987, 202). Constructivist inquiry should therefore be naturalistic, allowing the researcher to constantly refine questions, objectives, and approaches as the study continues to emerge and new discoveries are made (Jensen & Jankowski 1991).
It is with these principles in mind that I designed my study in a manner that would allow me to collect extensive amounts of qualitative data as a consistent observer in the same educational setting where my subjects were receiving their instruction. I attended (and video-recorded and made field observations within) all sixteen 150-minute sessions of the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course taken by my graduate student subjects and all four weeks of the daily, 50-minute class periods of the junior high school Reading Enrichment course. I additionally interviewed the graduate students twice each throughout the semester and the junior high school students once each at the conclusion of their unit of study. I also collected and made copies of all relevant work produced by both sets of students during this timeframe. This multitude of data afforded me the opportunity to fully immerse myself as a researcher in the experiences my subjects were undergoing within and outside of their respective classrooms.

I originally anticipated that I would use the systematic grounded-theory design tradition established by Strauss and Glazer (1967) to code and analyze my data, which ultimately would allow for the development of a substantive theory of how the central phenomenon of interest – effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives – works in a classroom. However, as the study
continued to emerge, I found this method to be too limiting to my evolving goals, in part because I was not studying a large enough quantity of subjects to saturate categories while coding, and also because the act of coding seemed to strip away the rich contextual narratives associated with particular subjects I was studying, narratives that I highly value as a constructivist researcher.

I therefore determined that a theory-building case study model of research would better serve my study. Case studies are useful when a researcher wants to “describe an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred” and “to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (Yin 2003, 15). Case studies are explorative and descriptive in nature and therefore fit well with a constructivist viewpoint that requires thorough examination of a variety of perspectives before meaning-making can occur. A case study model of research also allows the researcher to maximize his time focusing on those subjects that offer a particularly interesting or revealing set of circumstances that are helpful in distinguishing and generalizing defining elements of a theory (Eisenhardt 1989).

For my study, I selected three (of six) graduate student cases and six (of twelve) junior high student cases to more thoroughly explore and describe. These example cases represent a wide variety
of subjects and, accordingly, a diverse set of classroom experiences that offer unique and individual perspectives on the phenomenon of reading and composing sequential art narratives within an instructional setting. As a whole, they provide a means of generalizing a theoretical framework for effective instructional practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students.

The following sections will provide context for the physical settings where the research occurred as well as introduce the individual subjects who comprise the example case studies that will be analyzed in Chapter 4.

Research Settings

This study occurred in two different educational institutions within a rapidly growing Midwestern city of approximately 110,000 people. The city is home to multiple colleges and universities and three major regional hospitals, and its economy is largely centered on education, healthcare, insurance, and technology. Its largest racial groups include White Caucasian (79%) and African American (11.3%).

State University

The six graduate students who participated in this study attended a public university within the city with a student population of nearly 35,000 (including approximately 6,500 graduate students). The
participants were all full-time or part-time graduate students seeking a master’s degree or doctoral degree in the fields of English Education or Literacy within the College of Education. They were all enrolled in a 3-hour graduate course titled “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel,” a topical offering in the “Studies in English Education” series (graduate students are required to take a certain number of these seminars as part of their degree program). The class met one night a week for 2.5 hours for sixteen weeks during the winter semester and was taught by Dr. Roy Fox, chair of this dissertation. I collaborated with Dr. Fox in designing the course and occasionally served in an instructional capacity during some class periods (though never served as an evaluator who assigned grades), but otherwise attended as a participant observer. There were six graduate students who participated in the course, all of whom also consented to participate in this study (Table 1, on page 77, provides a quick reference to their pseudonyms and characteristics).

The course met in a large classroom within the main hall used by the College of Education. The building was remodeled in the 1990s and houses a large library of adolescent literature and a variety of modern technology available for instructional usage. The classroom featured a set of wall-length whiteboards, a large mobile Smartboard, and a variety of tables and chairs that were easily re-arranged into
various configurations throughout the semester (alternating between a full circle for discussion, pods for small group collaboration, and auditorium seating for presentations). A small library of graphic novels (compiled from the personal collections of Dr. Fox, myself, and the College of Education’s library) was carted into the classroom each instructional period for students to browse and/or borrow from.

A component of the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course required graduate students to design and teach a set of lessons related to the study of sequential art narratives to students in a field experience setting. Three of the graduate students who were concurrently employed as full-time or part-time teachers chose to conduct this field study in their own respective classrooms. The other three graduate students (whose cases I have selected to explore in-depth in Chapter 4) elected to work as a team to plan and facilitate a unified unit of instruction to 8th and 9th graders enrolled in a Reading Enrichment course at Lincoln Junior High School.

Lincoln Junior High School

Lincoln Junior High School is a pseudonym for what at the time of this study was one of three public junior high schools in the same aforementioned city as State University; the school district has since reorganized their secondary school structures resulting in the building now being classified as one of six public middle schools in the city.
The school district is one of the largest in the state, serving approximately 17,000 students, 37% of whom are a racial minority and 40% of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. In addition to its public school system, the city contains several small private and parochial school options.

At the time of this study, Lincoln Junior High School served approximately 770 eighth grade and ninth grade students, 44% of whom were a racial minority and 51% of whom qualified for free and reduced lunch. The building had approximately 60 faculty members with 10 years of average experience; two thirds of teachers held a master’s degree or higher level of education.

I served as a full-time faculty member at Lincoln Junior High School in the English Language Arts department during the academic year in which this study occurred (and the three years preceding it), as well as the chairman of the building’s Executive Council, an elected body charged with helping the principal make instructional leadership decisions. I taught four sections of ninth grade English and the school’s only section of Reading Enrichment, an elective course for eighth grade or ninth grade students who voluntarily sought a scheduled opportunity for supplemental reading and writing experiences beyond those that were assigned in their required grade-specific English course.
The Reading Enrichment course met daily for 50 minutes during the first period of the day throughout the entire academic year. By April, when the State University graduate students conducted their field teaching in the course, there were twelve students – two ninth graders and ten eighth graders – enrolled in the class, all of whom consented to participate in this study (Table 2, on page 82, provides a quick reference to their pseudonyms and characteristics). When the graduate students assumed teaching responsibilities in the Reading Enrichment course, I largely took on the role of silent observer / recorder. One of the graduate students, Jane, had been working as my full-time student teacher in the course since January and continued to serve as a co-teacher during the entire sequential art narrative unit, even when her colleagues provided primary instruction.

The Reading Enrichment course met in a standard-sized classroom that featured a Smartboard and data projector, a chalkboard, and approximately thirty desks in straight rows. The classroom was a shared instructional space that was primarily used by a different faculty member during the other periods of the day; she therefore largely determined the classroom’s aesthetic appearance and configuration of physical space. A small library of graphic novels was stored in the classroom that was comprised of titles that had been
selected by the students prior to the onset of the sequential art narrative unit and purchased using a parent teacher association grant.

Participants in the Reading Enrichment course generally had access during class-time to the building’s Media Center and Computer Lab, both of which were used frequently during the study. The Media Center was an expansive space in the middle of the school building that featured a large library containing a variety of books (including a sizeable collection of graphic novels), a handful of student desktop computers for browsing, and spacious, hospitable seating for independent reading. The Computer Lab was a small, partitioned room within the Media Center that featured a Smartboard and projector and 24 student desktop computers situated around the remaining perimeter of the room with inward-facing monitor displays that allowed the instructor to simultaneously scan what all students were accessing on their computers at any given moment.

Research Participants

The University’s Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct this study. All of the graduate student participants received and signed consent forms (Appendix C), and all of the junior high student participants received and signed youth assent forms (Appendix D) and their parents received and signed consent forms (Appendix E).
These forms explained the purpose of the study and the rights and responsibilities of participation. By signing each respective document, students agreed to have their classroom interactions be video-recorded, to participate in one or more individual interviews with me, and to allow their classroom compositions to be collected, analyzed, and reproduced in this publication.

In all of the cases, I possessed a level of familiarity with my subjects that is not usually available to researchers and that afforded me a substantial level of awareness of the subjects’ individual contexts at the onset of the study. As a doctoral student myself within State University’s English Education program, I had previously taken a number of courses with the other graduate students and possessed a collegial relationship with each of them before the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching Graphic Novels” course began in spring 2011. I also had served as the teacher of record for the Reading Enrichment course at Lincoln Junior High School throughout the 2010-2011 academic year and therefore had established teacher-student relationships with each of the adolescents enrolled in that course, relationships that were particularly strong due to the small class size and the workshop-style approach I employed in my pedagogy that incorporated frequent individual student conferencing. These pre-existing interactions with
the study’s subjects (in both settings) provided me with unique insights into the participants’ natures as students and individuals.

In total, there were six graduate students who participated in the study (three of whose cases have been chosen for expanded study) and twelve junior high students who participated in the study (six of whose cases have been chosen for expanded study). The following sections will describe those participants, with especial detail afforded to those subjects who comprise key cases.

**Graduate Student Subjects**

Two graduate students working towards master’s degrees (in English Education and Literacy, respectively) and four graduate students working towards doctoral degrees in English Education participated in the study. All of the graduate students had been enrolled in coursework for multiple semesters prior to taking “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” and voluntarily elected to enroll in the course. There were two male participants and four female participants. Two of the subjects were international students from Asian countries. Four of the six graduate students were simultaneously teaching in a full-time or part-time capacity in a K-12 or collegiate setting, and the other two graduate students had previously taught in such a capacity prior to enrolling in the graduate program. Table 1 provides a quick reference to the graduate student
subjects’ pseudonyms and a brief characterization of their demographics and required field teaching experience associated with the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course. For this dissertation, I will focus on three cases: Jane, Sawyer, and Hien. The omission of other cases should not be construed as a negative reflection on the value attributed to those experiences. All cases helped to shape the overall theory of effective sequential art narrative pedagogy that emerged from the study; however, the critical cases chosen for elaboration illustrate aspects of the themes reflected in the total collection of cases more vividly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Graduate Student pseudonyms with descriptive characteristics including a synopsis of their SAN teaching focus. Critical cases chosen for examination are bolded.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female in her late-20s, full-time master's student and full-time student teacher at Lincoln Junior High School. Focus: Teaching SAN visual literacy skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>Female in her late-20s, part-time master's student and full-time SPED teacher in local middle school. Focus: Using SANS with SPED students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hien</td>
<td>Male in his late 20s, full-time doctoral international student. Focus: Composing SANs using technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birsu</td>
<td>Female in her mid-30s, full-time doctoral international student and part-time college instructor. Focus: Reading SANs with ELL students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amna</td>
<td>Female in her mid-40s, part-time doctoral student and full-time teacher in an urban city. Focus: Writing SANs with ELL students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawyer</td>
<td>Male in his late 50s, full-time doctoral student. Focus: Using SANs to visualize Shakespearian dramatic scripts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Jane was a female in her late 20s at the time of this study who had moved from the East Coast of the United States to the Midwest after recently getting engaged to be married and was completing her last semester of master’s degree coursework in English Education at the State University. As part of that degree, she was also taking classes to earn certification to teach 6-12 English Language Arts, as she had originally majored in Business as an undergraduate student and had spent several years working in a professional marketing career before deciding to enroll in graduate school in order to enter the field of education. To complete her certification, she simultaneously worked as a full-time student teacher at Lincoln Junior High School during the spring of 2011; I was her assigned mentor teacher and she co-taught all of my courses with me during that semester. Jane had also completed 40 hours of clinical teaching experience in my Reading Enrichment course during the fall of 2010; she was therefore very well-acquainted with the junior high students who participated in the study by the time the sequential art narrative unit began in April. Jane and I first met during the previous summer when she enrolled in a National Writing Project institute I was facilitating that explored the intersection of art and language. She developed an interest in visual-verbal texts and visual literacy as part of that experience, which inspired her future participation in the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching
the Graphic Novel” course and as an intern in my Lincoln Junior High School courses. During the spring semester, she conducted her own Master’s research thesis project on the topic of visual literacy in the core ninth grade English course we co-taught at Lincoln Junior High School. In her personal life, Jane is an avid equestrian, a voracious reader, and a recreational painter.

Sawyer was a male in his late 50s during the time of this study. He is married and the father of two grown children. Sawyer grew up in the American Midwest but worked as a professional musician in a major city on the East Coast for a number of years before returning his young family to the Midwest, where he initially continued to work as a musician but eventually became a high school English instructor and taught for a decade before enrolling as a full-time doctoral student in English Education at State University. He began his program during the same semester that I did in fall of 2008, and I knew him well on a personal and professional level at the onset of this study due to the number of graduate courses we had taken together up to that point and several research projects on which we had collaborated. Sawyer has a particular affinity for studying and teaching medieval and renaissance literature and was somewhat skeptical of embracing sequential art narratives as ‘legitimate’ literary works prior to enrolling in the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course. His
perspective began to change throughout the semester as he read a
number of visual adaptations of classic literary works and began to
explore ways in which sequential art narratives could be used to help
students better understand the dramatic works of Shakespeare.

Hien was a male in his late 20s during the time of this study and
an international student from an Asian country participating full-time
in State University’s English Education doctoral program. Hien had
been studying at State University for 18 months at the onset of this
study and was relatively well-adjusted to American culture and the
English language. I had taken multiple courses with Hien prior to the
study, and he had also participated in the same Art of Language
Writing Project institute as Jane. Hien had grown up reading an
extensive number of manga novels and was very eager to learn more
about the medium by enrolling in the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching
the Graphic Novel” course. As a researcher, Hien had been interested
in studying the use of a variety of new literacies in education. Over
the course of this study, he became particularly interested in
investigating the dynamics between illustrating visual-verbal texts by
hand as opposed to using technological software to compose images.

**Junior High Student Subjects**

Two ninth grade students and ten eighth grade students from
Lincoln Junior High School participated in the study, the entirety of the
students enrolled in the school’s only section of Reading Enrichment in spring 2011 (a class size that was considerably lower than the 24-student average class size found across other course offerings at the school at that time). The student population within Reading Enrichment was quite diverse, though the subjects all shared the commonality that they voluntarily selected Reading Enrichment as a preferred elective course over a number of other course options in the Fine Arts, Practical Arts, or Foreign Language content areas. There were four males and eight females in the course; ten students were white Caucasians and two students were African Americans; six of the students qualified for free-and-reduced lunch. Four of the students were considered ‘high-achieving’ due to the grades they earned across their courses during the 2010-11 academic year, four were considered ‘moderate achievers,’ and four were considered ‘low achievers’ (implying that they failed multiple courses). The students were also diverse in their reading tastes and chose a wide range of graphic novels for their independent reading assignment during the sequential art narrative unit of instruction. Table 2 provides a quick reference to the junior high school student subjects’ pseudonyms and a brief characterization of their demographics and independent reading selections. For this dissertation, I will focus on six cases: David, Morgan, Ned, Regan, LaTanya, and Max. The omission of other cases
should not be construed as a negative reflection on the value attributed to those experiences. All cases helped to shape the overall theory of effective sequential art narrative pedagogy that emerged from the study; however, the critical cases chosen for elaboration illustrate aspects of the themes reflected in the total collection of cases more vividly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Junior High Student pseudonyms with descriptive characteristics including the title of their independently-selected graphic novel. Critical cases chosen for examination are bolded.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male Caucasian 9th Grader. High Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Superman: Red Son</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 9th Grader. Moderate Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Bone - Rose's Journey</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Male Caucasian 8th Grader. High Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Pride of Baghdad</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 8th Grader. High Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Vampire Knight (Manga)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peyton</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 8th Grader. High Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>The Professor's Daughter</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ned</td>
<td>Male Caucasian 8th Grader. Moderate Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Mega Man (Manga)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 8th Grader. Moderate Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Godchild (Manga)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regan</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 8th Grader. Moderate Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Queen Bee</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendel</td>
<td>Female Caucasian 8th Grader. Low Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Magneto Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Male Caucasian 8th Grader. Low Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>The Dark Knight Returns</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiamaka</td>
<td>Female African-American 8th Grader. Low Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Naruto (Manga)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaTanya</td>
<td>Female African-American 8th Grader. Low Academic Achievement. IGN: <em>Hana-Kimi (Manga)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
David was a male, ninth grade student at the time of the study and his family were members of the Mormon faith. David had taken the Reading Enrichment course with me as an eighth grade student and was repeating the class for high school credit as a ninth grader because he enjoyed its workshop-based design. He also was simultaneously enrolled in my core ninth grade English course during the 2010-2011 academic year, so I was more familiar with David as an individual and a student than any of the other junior high school subjects in the study. David was a fervent reader, particularly within the genre of science fiction, and was also an enthusiastic gamer who was especially enthralled with video games within the HALO and Star Wars universes. When I first met David in 2009, he was a reluctant writer, but by the time of the study in April 2011, he had blossomed into a fluent and proficient writer who submitted original short stories to creative writing contests for students. Though his literacy skills were fairly average for his age, he was a model student who diligently followed teacher instructions, consistently submitted quality assignments by required due dates, and frequently and voluntarily participated in course discussions. He emerged as an unofficial student leader in the course, though in non-academic social settings he tended to keep to himself and read or complete coursework.
Morgan was a female, eighth grade student during the time of this study. Prior to enrolling in Lincoln Junior High School during the 2010-2011 year, she had exclusively attended a small, Christian parochial school for her K-7 education. Morgan was a college-level reader and a talented writer from the onset of the course. She enjoyed participating in class discussions and offered original, analytical responses to questions that were posed. Morgan exhibited some behaviors typical of gifted students, however, in that at times she would neglect certain course assignments or activities that she deemed “pointless,” particularly journal assignments about the books she was reading independently. Outside of school, Morgan was an accomplished photographer whose work was regionally recognized.

Ned was a male, eighth grade student during the time of this study. He was a percussionist in the school band and a founding member of the school’s anime club, where he frequently displayed his talent for drawing using the manga style. Within the Reading Enrichment course, he was constantly reading independently-selected books, sometimes to the neglect of other instructional activities occurring in class. He was a reluctant writer, however, who avoided completing writing assignments until his grade in the class was adversely affected by the behavior, at which point he would rush to complete the minimal requirements needed to earn a “C” average. As
the year progressed, Ned began to increasingly participate in course discussions, revealing a humorous wit.

Regan was a female, eighth grade student at the time of this study. She was an athlete who competed on three of the school’s seasonal sports teams and was a bubbly, outgoing, and popular member of the “in crowd” at Lincoln Junior High School. She possessed average literacy skills and enjoyed leisure reading, but preferred to socialize with other class members when given the opportunity to discuss the latest Justin Bieber drama. She enjoyed providing comic relief to the other members of the Reading Enrichment course and rarely took her studies very seriously, including her work within the sequential art narrative unit. I have included her experiences in the study as a “negative case” (Corbin & Strauss 2008), one that serves as a foil to the majority of other cases and appears to contradict patterns or explanations that emerged from data analysis, in order to refine and broaden my theory of effective SAN pedagogy.

Max was a male, eighth grade student at the time of this study. He admitted early in the academic year that he only enrolled in Reading Enrichment because he viewed it as the “least undesirable” elective course he would be forced to take. Max virtually never spoke in class and only minimally conversed with instructors during individual conferencing. He was a hard-core video gamer who often struggled to
stay awake in the first-period course after having stayed up most of the night playing games. He engaged in independent reading, often with a Stephen King horror novel in hand, but otherwise rarely participated in course activities or completed course assignments, despite possessing a failing grade in the course due to these inactions.

LaTanya was an African-American female, eighth grade student at the time of this study. Within the Reading Enrichment course, LaTanya was respectful of her instructors and colleagues and generally engaged in instructional discussions or activities; however, outside of class, she often got into verbal altercations with other eighth grade female students and a handful of Lincoln Junior High School faculty members, which resulted in a number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. During her frequent absences from class, LaTanya rarely kept up with her coursework, resulting in numerous disruptions to her instruction, a high percentage of uncompleted assignments, and a failing grade in the course. Despite her struggles and her below-grade-level literacy skills, LaTanya seemed to enjoy the Reading Enrichment course and regarded it as somewhat of a safe haven from her other troubles.
Research Procedures

Though I was not typically a direct participant myself in either of the two settings used within this research study, my associations with the instructors in those educational institutions afforded me the opportunity to influence the design of the instruction that would ultimately occur in those settings. Specifically, I collaborated with Dr. Fox in developing the course syllabus for “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel,” including details of the course’s required assignments and tentative schedule, and I facilitated a preparatory planning session with the graduate students who elected to teach the sequential art narrative instructional unit at Lincoln Junior High School that ensured certain content, strategies, and activities would be included and that the various instructors’ lessons came together to form a cohesively holistic unit. In collaborating with these instructors (in both settings), I was able to confirm that their teaching practices would offer ample opportunities for me to investigate the following research questions that I had identified at the onset of my study:

Central Question:

- How do the pedagogical decisions made during a study of sequential art narratives affect students’ abilities to critically engage when reading and composing within the medium?
What theory emerges as a model of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students?

Sub-Questions:

- How (if at all) do students’ understanding of, attitude towards, and aptitude for verbal literacy, visual literacy, and sequential art narratives as a distinct type of text change throughout the course of the unit?
- How do verbal and visual literacies interact when reading or composing texts with visual elements?
- How does explicit instruction in the vocabulary and concepts associated with the medium of sequential art narratives affect student comprehension and composition within the medium?
- What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from reading sequential art narratives in the following manners:
  - Independently?
  - Collectively with a partner?
  - Collectively in a small group?
  - Collectively as a full class guided by the instructor?
- What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from engaging in the following writing processes:
Adapting existing prose / poetry / scripts into a sequential art format?

Developing an original narrative directly into a sequential art format?

Utilizing sequential art design software as a proxy for hand-drawn illustration?

These questions proved pivotal in providing focus to this study and its central objective to develop a framework of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives. The following sections will describe how the instructional practice was designed in each research setting in order to study these questions “in action” with participating subjects.

**Graduate SAN Course**

The course syllabus for “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” explains that the class will be divided into four major components:

1) introduction of visual/verbal literacy—its principles, processes, and basic theories that apply across media; 2) reading and interpreting graphic novels; 3) composing graphic novel mini-narratives; and 4) the pedagogy of graphic novels, including analysis of teaching a graphic text. (Graduate Course Syllabus – January 2011).
This description largely depicts the chronological approach to instruction that was employed in the course.

Graduate students spent the first six class periods learning to read sequential art narratives by browsing a wide variety of self-selected graphic novels and reading Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1993) along with several scholarly articles on visual literacy - Arnheim’s “A Plea for Visual Thinking” (1980), Barry’s “The Nature and Power of Images” and “Perception and Visual Common Sense” (1997), and LaSpina’s “The Visual Pattern of Meaning and Principles of Gestalt” (2009). Students would later in the semester collectively read and discuss two acclaimed graphic novels, *Kings in Disguise* (Vance & Burr 2006) and *American Born Chinese* (Yang 2006) using a variety of in-class approaches (such as reading a series of pages with a partner or as a small group). Students collectively kept an online, running list of elements unique to sequential art narratives as they encountered additional texts. As a culminating assessment for this portion of the course, students were required to write a visual-verbal analysis paper of an independently-selected graphic novel.

Mid-semestert, graduate students began to shift their focus from reading sequential art narratives to teaching them. Students independently researched and read practitioner research articles about the use of comics in the classroom and explored approaches to
teaching historical and cultural contexts while teaching graphic novels as they read *Kings in Disguise*. I facilitated a brainstorming session during the eighth course meeting where participants collectively planned a 4-week introductory unit of instruction for graphic novels that became the blueprint for the field study that would occur at Lincoln Junior High School in April. Jane, Sawyer, and Hien continued to flesh out their individual lessons that would comprise the totality of that unit, while Meghan, Birsu, and Amna developed independent instructional plans for incorporating sequential art narratives into their own classrooms. As a culminating assessment for this portion of the course, students were required to write a scholarly article based on their SAN field teaching experiences.

During the final third of the semester, while graduate students were teaching in the field, their focus in class shifted one last time to the composition of sequential art narratives. As a culminating assessment for this portion of the course, students would ultimately be required to compose a brief, original graphic narrative. To help students achieve this goal, a writing workshop instructional approach was employed that allowed them to brainstorm ideas with a small group of colleagues, to participate in guided tutorials of various compositional approaches (including adapting a verbal text into a visual-verbal format, developing a script for an original graphic
narrative, working collaboratively in writer/illustrator pairings, and exploring comic-making software programs), and to conference with Dr. Fox and colleagues about their writing to troubleshoot problems and revise initial drafts. Additionally, Dr. Fox utilized a variety of modeling exercises to help demonstrate the SAN composition process for the graduate students: he and I worked collaboratively on an improvised, original sequential art mini-narrative crafted in real-time in front of the class where we shared our internal thinking processes out loud; Dr. Fox also worked outside of class (ahead of schedule) to complete an original sequential art short story, *Odd Fellows*, that he shared with the class along with his process notes. At the end of the course, the graduate students themselves presented their original compositions with each other in a publication celebration.

**Junior High School SAN Unit of Instruction**

The Reading Enrichment course at Lincoln Junior High School sought as its primary objective to “expand student literacy skills through immersive studies into various genres and media of literature” (Junior High Course Syllabus – Appendix C, August 2010).

Units of instruction were organized by genre/medium. In the fall semester, students studied various genres of prose fiction (realism, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction, plot-based genres, etc.). In the spring semester, students studied nonfiction prose, poetry,
theatre/scriptwriting, sequential art narratives, and film, establishing a progression of study for texts that increasingly became more multimodal in nature as students progressed to the end of the year.

Each unit of instruction tended to focus on teaching students to read texts within the given genre/medium during the first two-thirds of the unit and then on teaching students to write texts within the given genre/medium during the final portion of the unit, requiring students to compose an original story in that genre or adapt a previous story they had written into the new medium being studied.

Students generally engaged in an instructional model that alternated between (1) inquiry into short mentor texts that were collectively read and analyzed by the full-class and (2) extended periods of independent reading/writing time in a workshop environment where the course instructors individually conferenced with students. In addition to their creative writing assignment, students were also generally required to complete journal entries about their independent reading experiences during each unit.

During the sequential art narrative instructional unit that comprised this research study, I abdicated my teaching responsibilities to Jane, Hien, and Sawyer, and became a largely silent observer in the classroom. The unit occurred during four consecutive weeks in April following the junior high school’s Spring Break.
Sawyer taught the first week of the unit and designed a series of lessons around the first act of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, using the play as a bridge between the theatre/scriptwriting unit the students had previously studied and the new sequential art narrative unit. He began by having students attempt to “translate” the script from Act 1, Scene 5 of the play into modern vernacular. Sawyer then asked students to visualize the drama in the scene and ultimately to construct a series of images that depicted what visually might occur on stage. He ended his lesson series with a full-class discussion about the differences that existed between the script and the visual texts the students had created.

Jane facilitated the next eight days of the unit. She initially provided explicit instruction in sequential art narrative terms/concepts and visual literacy modeling using a PowerPoint presentation that featured dozens of panels / pages from a variety of existing graphic novels that illustrated those concepts in action.

She then distributed graphic novels for independent reading that students had previously ordered (as the beneficiaries of a parent teacher association grant for books). As students read in class, Jane facilitated a reading workshop and conferenced with individual students. She also required students to write journal entries about what they were reading (prompts can be found in Appendix F).
Intermittently, Jane also led students through the collective reading of two graphic novels. Students read the first two sections of Shaun Tan’s wordless novel, The Arrival, together as a full-class using the classroom data projector and Smartboard. The class worked together to interpret what was going on in the text and to answer questions that colleagues posed. Students then were asked to finish reading the book in pairs. Jane initially set a timer for how long each set of partners needed to spend reading/discussing a particular page, but eventually allowed student teams to proceed through the novel at their own pace and only intervened when she thought particular groups were rushing through the pictures without analyzing them.

There were four days in the middle of the unit where Lincoln Junior High School administered state standardized testing and implemented an alternative course schedule to accommodate testing requirements. Only four students – David, Amber, Morgan, and Peyton – attended Reading Enrichment during these days, at which time Jane had them read through the graphic novel Kings in Disguise together as a small group. Jane and the students sat together in a circle, individually read a few pages at a time, and then stopped to briefly talk about what they had just read together. The group did not finish the novel by the end of the alternative testing schedule, but all
four students chose to finish reading the book on their own during independent reading time.

When the schedule returned to normal and all students returned to class, Jane facilitated a one-day writing workshop where students were asked to adapt an original poem they had written earlier in the year into a sequential art format. This exercise was designed to help students transition from being readers of graphic novels to composers of sequential art narratives in order to begin thinking about how they would fulfill their culminating assignment for the unit, the development of a short, original sequential art mini-narrative.

At this point in the unit, Hien took over instruction and had students meet in the Media Center Computer Lab for three class periods. He introduced students to the comic-making software program ToonDoo [www.toondoo.com] and facilitated a digital writing workshop where students designed simple, original web-based comic strips. Hien and Jane then worked together to facilitate a writing workshop during the final days of the unit where they conferenced with individuals as students worked on their original sequential art mini-narrative using whichever compositional medium (i.e., paper/pencil, ToonDoo, etc.) they preferred. Students had the opportunity to share their work with one another before they turned the compositions in to Jane to be scored.
Data Collection

The data collection process requires the following phases: locating site/individual, gaining access and establishing rapport, purposeful sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data (Creswell 2007, 118).

I intentionally chose to study sites/populations where I had natural, unrestricted access as an active member of the learning community. My status as a colleague to the graduate student subjects at State University and as a teacher to the junior high school student subjects at Lincoln Junior High School afforded me a pre-established rapport with my subjects that, in turn, led to an immediate, increased willingness among participants to act without inhibitions in their learning environments, to openly share their formal and informal compositions related to that coursework, and to candidly communicate with me during interviews.

That said, I also ensured from the onset that students in the various research settings were aware of the purposes and processes of my study and that they (and in the case of the Lincoln Junior High Students, also their parents) provided voluntary consent to participate and understood their participation had no bearing on their grade in the course and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point. These forms may be referenced in Appendices C, D, and E.
I comprehensively collected a variety of data from all participating subjects in order to have a wide assortment of recorded experiences by which to ultimately identify critical case samples, those individuals that illustrated particularly dramatic or critically important aspects of the phenomenon of interest (Hatch 2002). Critical case sampling permits logical generalization and application of findings to other cases, to the effect that “if it happens here, it will happen anywhere” or “if it doesn’t happen here, it won’t happen anywhere” (Patton 1990, 174). In determining critical case samples, I also used maximum variation sampling, which aims at capturing and describing the central themes that cut across a diverse set of participant experiences (Creswell 2007) because “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (Patton 1990, 172). This mixed combination of purposeful sampling methods best suited my research goal of attempting to develop a theoretical framework of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives.

The forms of data that I collected within the graduate and junior high school courses included: a) filmed observations of all graduate course sessions; b) copies of the informal notes/reflections and formal assignments completed and submitted by graduate students as part of
the requirements of that course; c) recorded interviews with graduate students before and after their teaching field experience; d) filmed observations of all lessons facilitated at the Lincoln Junior High School by graduate students; e) copies of formal assignments completed and submitted by the junior high school students as part of the requirements of their course; f) interviews with the junior high school students following the completion of the graphic novel unit; and h) field notes taken while I observed and/or analyzed all of the aforementioned activities and artifacts. Table 3 provides a quick reference to the various data sources used in this study, including a brief description of each type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Data Sources and Descriptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video Recordings</td>
<td>Video was taken of all graduate course sessions and all class periods during the SAN unit of instruction at Lincoln Junior High School. Recordings were played back and analyzed throughout the research process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher's Field Notes</td>
<td>Observations and/or reflections were written by hand by me while observing class sessions and conducting interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Graduate student subjects were interviewed before and after their teaching field experience. Junior high school student subjects were interviewed after completion of the SAN unit of instruction. Interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewee and later transcribed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Work</td>
<td>Copies of all formal composition assignments associated with the coursework of both graduate student subjects and junior high school student subjects were made and retained. Copies of informal writing/drawing in response to instruction were collected from subjects upon completion of the learning task when made available by the subjects.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Minor data collection complications were experienced throughout the research process. Several of the initial video recordings of instructional sessions suffered from poor sound quality and restricted viewing of students’ individual work due to the static placement of the camcorder within the classroom. I resolved this issue by developing more strategic vantage points for recording that had closer proximity to subjects, as well as beginning to personally operate the camcorder during portions of an instructional period where students were working individually or in small groups throughout the classroom, physically moving the camera around the room in order to capture the work and/or conversations that particular subjects were producing.

A second unforeseen data collection complication was experienced when attempting to accumulate student work samples. Though I had full access to all formal compositions that subjects submitted to their instructor as graded assignments in their respective courses, I was not always able to collect and make copies of students’ informal writings/drawings produced during a particular instructional period. I was mindful not to allow my presence as a researcher to disrupt the natural learning environment within the classroom, but in doing so, I would sometimes miss the opportunity to collect students’ informal work, especially at Lincoln Junior High School where many subjects would rarely retain those work samples beyond the class
period in which they originally produced them. I began to position
myself at the doorway at the end of class periods in order to gather
samples from any subjects who did not wish to retain their work. I
also used the aforementioned camcorder maneuvering during the
instructional period in order to at least obtain video footage of all
subjects’ informal writings, even if I ultimately was unable to collect a
print copy of the work.

No other notable data collection issues were faced in the field.

All data sources were ultimately recorded digitally; video
recordings of course sessions and participant interviews were directly
made using a digital camcorder, and hard copies of all student work
samples and my researcher’s field notes were scanned as PDF files and
then returned to their respective owners. Electronic data were saved
to two external hard drives – one used throughout the research
process and the other relegated as a back-up copy – and both hard
drives were stored in a locked, fireproof safety deposit box in my office
in order to ensure appropriate security for participants’ confidentiality.

With that same aim in mind, all digital data files were titled using
subjects’ pseudonyms and/or recording dates and no other individuals
accessed any of the data sources throughout the research process
except for me.
Data Analysis

Data sources were analyzed using a constructivist approach within a theory-building case study model of research that employed critical case and maximum variation sampling. I began analyzing data sources at the point of initial collection through the active use of field notes and I continued analysis throughout the research study and the writing process. As I explored how the central phenomenon of interest – effective approaches to teaching sequential art narratives – works in a classroom, certain pedagogical strategies emerged as being particularly influential to student learning. These topics became the lenses by which I began to analyze all data sources. Table 4 provides an overview of the codes that arose during data analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Literacy</td>
<td>How explicit instruction in visual literacy or SAN concepts impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Texts</td>
<td>How exposure to a variety of graphic novels or other visual-verbal texts impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>How reading, writing, and/or discussing with others impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Composition</td>
<td>How developing one's own visual-verbal texts impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transmediation</td>
<td>How adapting non-visual texts into a visual format (or vice-versa) and/or evaluating those decisions in others' work impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradual Release of Responsibility</td>
<td>How the use of student-centered pedagogy and a workshop environment impacted a student's understanding of SANs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I initially relied on analytical techniques associated with the grounded theory model of research, allowing ideas and observations to arise spontaneously as I actively read and re-read transcripts from a variety of data sources; as repeated concepts became apparent, they were tagged with the codes listed in Table 4 and began to engage in general theorizing about how the concepts related to one another and to broader categories associated with my research question (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

As analysis continued, however, I found this method to be too limiting to my evolving goals. I was not studying a large enough quantity of subjects to appropriately saturate categories while coding within the grounded theory tradition, which complicated my ability to move into the memoing phase of data analysis with integrity (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Furthermore, the open coding methodology that had initially served as an asset in making sense of my data now began to feel contrived and artificial upon continued application. Now that I had a clear vision of the concepts (codes) that should be studied, I found it more productive to move away from theoretical abstraction and to instead focus on exploring and describing the rich narrative experiences associated with the particular subjects I was studying, experiences that in turn could contextualize the theory I was developing in actual instructional practice.
This evolving research goal seemed to be better matched with the data analysis approach described by Yin (2003) for a theory-building case study model; it proposes three strategies: relying on theoretical propositions, thinking about rival explanations, and developing a case description. I began searching for critical cases that represented maximum variation within my subjects’ collective experiences while also highlighting vivid, contextualized examples of themes and patterns experienced across cases. In doing so, I found Corbin & Strauss’s questions of “so what?” and “what if?” (2008, p. 84) to be especially helpful in discerning whether particular aspects of a subject’s experience were unique and influential enough to warrant recognition as a critical case.

Once I had identified critical cases for study, I primarily used the analytic technique of explanation building, a type of pattern matching that seeks to analyze case study data by comparing the findings of a case against a theoretical proposition and then gradually revising that proposition to account for the totality of critical cases being studied (Yin 2003). The existing research I reviewed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation assumes certain pedagogical implications about the various instructional strategies that were studied by my research design and emerged as codes during my data analysis. Chapter 4 will analyze the manner in which those instructional strategies impacted
students within the critical cases of this study, explaining in what ways the cases uphold and in what ways they challenge or require adapted thinking about how those pedagogical decisions impact the effective development of reading and composition skills as they relate specifically to sequential art narratives.

**Quality of Study**

A number of intentional strategies were employed during this research study to ensure the validity of its findings. I incorporated the following criteria (Creswell, 2007) in order to enhance the quality of the study: prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of data, member-checking, and integrity.

My prolonged engagement in the field in both research settings, both prior to the onset of the research study and through its duration, provided me with a deep and first-hand understanding of the phenomenon being studied. I was able to foster open and trusting relationships with participants, to unobtrusively observe all happenings during all related instructional periods, and to obtain direct access to all participant work and correspondence. This first-hand familiarity with all participants and events within the study afforded me unique insights into the cases I was studying, enhancing the quality and dependability of my findings.
I collected a comprehensive amount of data throughout the study in a variety of formats and used triangulation of those data sources to ensure multi-faceted validity of my claims. By checking each theme against recorded class sessions, my own reflective field notes, participants’ work, and participants’ interview responses, I have been able to ensure that claims made in my theory are supported by a variety of perspectives representing a variety of points in time, maximizing the overall theory’s credibility.

To further increase validity, I also employed member-checking with my participants as a way to safeguard against my own researcher bias. My strong relationships with my participants and consistent access to them in the field allowed me to continually discuss my evolving theory with them and to check that their voices were reported authentically in my findings. I especially sought to use member-checking by asking clarifying questions during interviews and in regard to student work submissions. Doing so has ensured that my theory remains firmly grounded in my subjects’ experiences as participants, not my own perception of those experiences.

Finally, I endeavored to uphold personal integrity at all times throughout the research process, which Creswell states is a key feature to validity (2007). As one such example, I intentionally abdicated all grading responsibilities in both the graduate course and
the junior high school course throughout the study to make it clear to participants that their interactions with me would have no bearing whatsoever on their own personal academic progress. However, as instruction progressed in both research settings, I made sure to consistently discuss my observations with Dr. Fox and Sawyer, Jane, and Hien so that instructional outcomes could be optimized for the next class period. By consistently acting as a reflective practitioner, I was able to continually evaluate my research practices and make improvements to them when warranted.

**Limitations of Study**

Despite attempts to develop a study of the highest quality, there were a number of potential limitations inherent in my research design.

While having previously established familiarity with participants prior to my study has been cited throughout this chapter as a benefit of the study, these pre-existing conceptions of my participants may have potentially biased my analysis of their experiences. Creswell (2007) writes, “Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretations, and they ‘position themselves’ in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences” (21). I have attempted to be mindful of my personal biases throughout the research process.
and intentionally used member checking as a validation strategy in order to counteract any unconscious act on my part to color the data and analysis with my personal perceptions.

Another way in which my relationship with my participants may have potentially biased the study stems from the fact that I was the official teacher of record for the Reading Enrichment students at Lincoln Junior High School and served in an unofficial teaching capacity at times during the State University “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” graduate course. This status created a power differential between myself and my subjects, especially in regard to the role that grading and evaluation plays in a course. To avoid any threat of coercion that might invalidate the study’s results, I made it explicitly and repeatedly known during the consent process that students’ grades would not be affected in any way by participation or refusal to participate in the study and that participants could withdraw from the study at any point without facing any recourse; I also provided subjects with the University’s Institutional Review Board contact information in case they felt uncomfortable discussing questions or concerns with me. To additionally protect against coercion amidst my most vulnerable subjects, I abdicated my teaching responsibilities – including grading and assessment – to Jane, Hien,
and Sawyer during the sequential art narrative unit of instruction at Lincoln Junior High School.

The nature of my subjects also poses a potential limitation to the study’s findings. The instructional courses in both research settings were elective in nature, meaning that students voluntarily enrolled in those courses, presumably because they held some level of interest in the course objectives. Further study is needed to see if the theory of effective pedagogy for sequential art narrative instruction proposed by this dissertation applies equally to students who were required against their will to read and write visual narratives or who resist the act of reading and writing in general in academic settings.

Similarly, both research settings featured courses that had abnormally low class sizes. It is reasonable to assume that the individual and small group instruction described in several of the cases in this study may not have been witnessed in as much quantity and quality in classes with a greater total number of students. Therefore, further study is needed to see if the theory of effective pedagogy for sequential art narrative instruction proposed by this dissertation applies in similar or different ways in larger class settings.

A final perceived limitation of the study stems from the progressive nature of the city and educational institutions where the research study occurred. As stated in Chapter 1, comics and graphic
novels are still somewhat of a taboo medium in American society, especially in academic settings. There was no notable prejudicial behavior against sequential art narratives among students, parents, educators, or administrators in the research settings in my study; instead, both Lincoln Junior High School and State University were observed as highly supportive environments for sequential art narratives, as exhibited by the institutions’ library systems featuring extensive collections of graphic novels, their courses including SAN study as part of their curricula, and their administrators’ approval for the research to occur. Further study is needed to see if the theory of effective pedagogy for sequential art narrative instruction proposed by this dissertation applies equally in settings where stakeholders hold prejudicial attitudes about the medium.
CHAPTER FOUR:
FINDINGS - CASE STUDIES

Graduate Students:
Jane, Sawyer, Hien
Junior High Students:
David
Morgan
Ned
Regan
Max
LaTanya

Summary

This research study investigated the impact that various instructional strategies had on teaching students to read and compose sequential art narratives in an effort to establish a theory of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students. The study tracked the experiences of six graduate students learning to read, write, and teach graphic novels over the course of a semester-length seminar, as well as the experiences of twelve junior high school students who participated in a four-week, introductory instructional unit to graphic novels taught by three of the graduate students within a field experience setting. This chapter will examine the critical cases that provided important insights into the theory of effective sequential art narrative instruction that emerged from the research study.

The discussion of findings in this chapter is structured as follows:
1) Analysis of three graduate student cases – Jane, Sawyer, and Hien
collectively as a multi-case study depicting the shared experiences of the participants who served in a dual capacity as both students and instructors throughout the study; and 2) Analysis of six junior high school student cases – David, Morgan, Ned, Regan, Max, and LaTanya – independently as individual case studies illustrating the diverse set of experiences encountered within the phenomenon of reading and composing sequential art narratives within an instructional setting.

**Graduate Students: Jane, Sawyer, Hien**

One of the questions that I asked all of the participating graduate students in their final interview with me at the end of their “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course was “What metaphor would you use to describe your learning this semester?” Three of the six total graduate students – Birsu, Amna, and Jane - described themselves and their experiences as akin to immigrants learning to cope within a land they had heard of but never truly lived in before. Jane shared this revealing commentary:

Looking back at my journey this semester, I guess I feel a lot like the nameless protagonist of *The Arrival*. This new world of SANs has at times felt warmly familiar...and at other times felt frustratingly foreign. Like him, I have been forced to rely on visual meaning-making far more
than I ever have before, and while that has led to difficulty at times, it’s also been exhilarating, even liberating. I feel there is still so much more out there to explore with SANs, but I also feel much more at home in this new environment. Like the daughter at the end of The Arrival, I am excited to share what I’ve learned about SANs with the many people in my life who don’t know what they have been missing...

It is quite possible that an underlying theme of immigration was indeed unconsciously suggested throughout the course, through the graphic novels that were selected for collective reading (the previously mentioned The Arrival, the second-generation immigrant assimilation story American Born Chinese, and the Depression-era wanderings of the homeless Kings in Disguise), the “guest” teaching field experiences in which Jane, Sawyer, and Hien participated, and the international exchange status of several of the graduate students themselves.

Yet even those students who did not speak specifically of immigration chose similar metaphors to describe their learning. Hien depicted his experiences in the course as a “homecoming” to a medium that was fondly regarded in his childhood and formative to his own literacy development but largely forgotten and abandoned in his adult life as an educator; he was thankful not just to reacquaint
himself with SANs but also to learn ways to re-integrate them into his current personal and professional life. Sawyer spoke about his experiences as “an awakening” from the prejudicial stereotypes he once held about the medium to a realization and appreciation for the untapped potential they possessed. In all cases, the graduate students described their learning as some form of journey to a new/renewed destination where the experiences they encountered ultimately transformed the way they would think and teach about literacy moving forward.

It seems a fitting way to discuss their experiences, then, is to juxtapose them against Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey template, a concept first introduced in his seminal work, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell describes the basic pattern as:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (23).

Though Campbell was writing about a monomyth structure found across a variety of narrative texts, his insights prove equally applicable to describing the collective case studies of Jane, Sawyer, and Hien as
they journeyed through the “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” course and its associated assignments.

Our teacher’s journey begins with a call to adventure, a moment where an individual’s normal everyday circumstances are unexpectedly interrupted by an invitation to head into the unknown – in this case, the medium of sequential art narratives. None of the participating graduate students in this study were avid readers of graphic novels or other sequential art texts at the onset of the course, and all of them confessed in their initial interview with me that they almost certainly would not have chosen to read graphic novels (or use them in their classrooms) of their own volition had the course not prompted them to do so. The stereotype of sequential art narratives as “academically inferior text” that was described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation was so pervasive for the graduate students in this study that it literally took a tangible request with extrinsic motivational influence to move them to seek out a SAN text and read it.

Several students even expressed there were moments during course registration and the first few class periods where they, like many of the heroes in Campbell’s exemplar myths, considered refusing the call outright, for reasons ranging from a lack of belief in the utility of sequential art narratives to a fear of inadequacy in being able to effectively work with them. In his first interview, Sawyer explained, “I
truly took this class because it was the only Studies in English Education offering this semester, and I didn’t want to postpone that and throw off my course of study. But there are several classes in the English department I would rather be taking right now…” When pressed to expand upon that reasoning, Sawyer revealed that he (at that time) could not foresee himself ever asking his own students to engage in a serious study of a graphic novel when they alternatively could/should be reading a more conventional piece of literature from the Western literary canon. He also explained that a second motivating factor for ultimately deciding to take the course, despite his reservations in its professional relevance to him, was a curiosity in learning why some other educators that he respected thought so highly of the medium.

Ultimately, each graduate student in the study did indeed choose to enroll and remain in the course and begin their studies in the sequential art medium, and once committed to that journey, like Campbell’s heroes, became aware of a need for a knowledgeable mentor in order to become effective in navigating the new world. Graduate students identified the following specific components as integral to their early success: a) modeling of techniques for how to effectively read and think about a SAN text; b) a technical vocabulary for describing SAN composition; and c) recommendations of quality
SAN text titles. These components required that an experienced and prolific SAN reader impart a specialized knowledge set upon those who were new to the form.

Most of the graduate students in the study revealed that they possessed a basic understanding of how to read comics before they enrolled in the course and could proficiently comprehend a SAN text on their own without direct instruction on how to do so. However, they shared that listening to myself or Dr. Fox or even other students discuss their thinking out loud as they read a page from a graphic novel, a process that was routinely incorporated into each of the first half-dozen class periods, allowed them to pick up on important aspects of reading SAN texts that caused them to henceforth alter their own reading behavior. Jane described one such lesson:

During the read alouds, one of the important things I quickly realized was that I was reading panels on my own entirely too quickly. I would simply read the words and move on, sometimes skipping wordless panels altogether. But in watching you discuss how a variety of visual details in the panels were enriching your understanding of the text - details I completely overlooked myself - I learned how important it is to slow down while reading a SAN text and give equal measure to words and images alike.
In a separate interview, Hien mentioned that prior to a read-aloud where Dr. Fox had spent several moments pondering what was happening off-panel between the two printed images, he had never given much thought to the way that readers of SAN texts unconsciously fill in the gap between panels while reading, and that becoming aware of this process profoundly altered the way he read within the medium throughout the rest of the semester.

Hien was, of course, describing the concept of closure above, but at the time of the interview, he lacked the technical language to label such a phenomenon. All of the graduate students in the study reiterated how important learning and mastering the vocabulary of sequential art narratives was in allowing them to think and talk in sophisticated ways about the medium. Sawyer explains, “[The McCloud text] taught me to think differently about comics, but perhaps more importantly, it also taught me to talk differently about them, too.” He emphasized how important this transformation was for him by comparing it to the way amateur listeners versus trained performers talk about music (a field he himself had years of experience within). “It’s impossible to talk critically about a text, to fully appreciate it, if you don’t have a language by which to adequately and efficiently describe the choices that the composer is making.” Jane echoed similar sentiments in one of her interviews: “When I
finally had words to describe things like closure, perspective, or framing, I could give a name to what I was experiencing while I was reading, which in turn led me to think more analytically instead of just merely comprehending what was going on.”

Finally, the graduate students all mentioned how important it was to them to receive personalized graphic novel recommendations and/or listen to graphic novel book talks provided by the instructor as a means to efficiently discover high-quality, engaging titles within the medium. Hien remarked, “Most of the manga novels I read growing up were entertaining to me, but were not very high quality. You helped me find books that used the form I loved from my childhood but also had content that was interesting to me as an adult. I don’t know if I would have been able to find them on my own.” Sawyer, who upon recommendation chose to read Garreth Hind’s adaption of Beowulf for his independent graphic novel analysis assignment, made a similar comment in his final interview with me: “I’ve seen a lot of terrible comic adaptations of classic literature over the years, any one of which would have made me double-down on my original stereotypes about graphic novels had I picked up that book to write about. But by putting Hinds in my hands, you accomplished the exact opposite. It just shows how the right book can make all the difference.” It also
shows how important a teacher can be in helping students navigate text selection to preempt literacy success.

Armed with their mentor’s resources and advice, Campbell’s heroes have a tangible moment where the individual leaves the known limits of his or her old world and ventures fully into the unknown and potentially dangerous realm of the new world. For the graduate students exploring sequential art narratives in this study, a similar transformative moment was described, one that fundamentally altered the way they subsequently interacted with SAN texts. Hien described it succinctly in his final interview with me:

> For me, the most important part of this class has been being made to create my own visual text. It is much harder than it appears, and it has given me new appreciation for the work that goes into making comics. Now when I read a graphic novel, I am thinking about what the writer is trying to do and I am noticing things I did not see before because of that.

Every graduate student in the study expressed a similar sentiment; by being forced to create even short sequential art narratives texts themselves, the participants began to read SAN texts from a writer’s craft-based perspective, which elevated their level of thinking about the text. Jane said, “It was sort of a backwards design. The more I
practiced creating SANs, the more I knew what to look for when reading them, and the more I wanted to read them, lots of them, to look for different ways of expressing ideas in the medium.”

A substantial amount of class time was devoted to fostering graduate students’ budding SAN composition skills. Students used the six steps of creating art (idea/purpose, form, idiom, structure, craft, and surface) outlined in Scott McCloud’s chapter seven of *Understanding Comics* (1993, p.170) as a framework for initiating discussion of potential ideas that could form the basis of original SAN stories. In a subsequent class period, they worked in pairs – one partner focusing on verbal storytelling, the other on visual illustration – to craft informal drafts of improvised stories they co-created. In yet another class period, I led graduate students through a step-by-step process of individually adapting a classic fairy tale or other simple, popular story into a single-page SAN format, focusing on applying one visual literacy concept at a time (i.e., a) closure: students identified which aspects of the story they would visually depict in panels and which they would leave readers to infer in the gutter; b) paneling: students determined the best way to lay out the panels on their page from their previous list; c) encapsulation: students decided how to frame and position the individual images within each panel; etc.).
The course instructor, Dr. Fox, created his own exemplar SAN text over Spring Break and shared the work with the graduate students upon their return to class in April, along with a running list of benefits and challenges he had recorded encountering during the composition process (Appendix G); students used this modeling to help them prepare for their own writing task. Once the graduate students determined a suitable topic for their original SAN composition project, a writing workshop format was incorporated on a weekly basis into the latter half of the graduate course, where students would regularly share their progress with a small group of colleagues and garner feedback regarding revisions to be made and/or suggestions for future development.

These are examples of a number of trials that the graduate students faced as they became initiated into the world of sequential art narratives, exercises that simultaneously challenged them but also incrementally led to their ultimate transformation as a proficient reader/composer of SAN texts. They tended to talk about these trials in terms of the three major competencies outlined in the title of the course – reading SANs, writing SANs, and teaching SANs – and identified a summative task that acted as the final assessment for each competency, similar to the climactic confrontation found at the apex of Campbell’s monomyth. In each case, the summative task
represented an experience where the learner would have to demonstrate independent proficiency with the given skill in a tangible, public manner.

In terms of reading sequential art narratives, the graduate students considered their independent graphic novel analysis paper as the ultimate challenge they were preparing themselves for throughout their studies and the moment where they began to thereafter see themselves as accomplished readers of sequential art texts. The assignment required students to select a graphic novel that had not been used in class, to read it independently, and to write a paper that analyzed the literary merits of the work, using both verbal and visual means of analysis. In his final interview with me, Sawyer explained:

The graphic novel analysis paper was the moment I finally had to own all of the concepts we had been talking about in the first half of the class. It had been interesting up to that point, but that was the moment where it became real. It was also the point where I really began to enjoy myself, and where I realized that I had been terribly wrong about my earlier perceptions of the simplicity of these texts.

The graduate students listed the following challenges as “trials” they had to overcome to become successful at analyzing SAN texts:

- learn to read more slowly
• learn to pay critical attention to visual illustration
• learn and use the technical vocabulary of the SAN medium
• browse a diverse variety (in both content and style) of sequential art texts
• learn how to quickly preview a graphic novel to evaluate high quality composition versus low quality composition
• practice analyzing individual panels of a SAN text and sharing that critique with others
• learn how to scan and screen-capture a panel from a SAN text and embed that file into an academic paper.

The graduate students identified the following supports as useful scaffolds that helped them to develop strategies to overcome the aforementioned reading challenges:

• the incorporation of instructor or peer “read/think alouds” of a single page of a sequential art text as a routine aspect of class for the first several weeks of the semester
• reading Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and other academic texts that explained the concepts at work in visual-verbal texts
• substantial amounts of in-class time provided for independent browsing/reading of various graphic novels
- access to a large in-class library of graphic novels with the ability to check-out books for at-home reading
- time allotted in-class to orally collaborate with classmates to share reading insights, frustrations, etc.
- book talks or personal recommendations of quality, engaging graphic novels made by the instructors
- access to exemplars that model effective ways to write a scholarly critique of a sequential art narrative text

When it came to writing sequential art narratives, the graduate students identified their personal SAN mini-narrative assignment as the primary goal they were training to achieve. The assignment required students to plan, draft, revise/edit, and publish an original visual-verbal text with 20-50 panels; students individually shared their final products with their colleagues during the final class period of the semester by projecting each page on the classroom Smartboard and talking through their writing process for producing the work. My final interviews with the graduate students occurred the week(s) prior to this presentation, at which time many were feeling anxiety at the prospect of finishing their composition by the deadline at a level that met their original vision of what they wanted to accomplish in the piece, but when the final class period arrived, the participants treated
it as a celebration and were largely proud of the work they had produced and presented. In her final interview, Jane told me:

My SAN mini-narrative assignment may be the most stressful project I’ve worked on in my entire Master’s program, but it’s also shaping up to be the most rewarding. Having studied so many great graphic novels this semester, it’s been frustrating not to be able to visually execute the ideas I have in my head for my narrative exactly as I want them on the page in front of me. That said, I’ve also surprised myself quite a bit – my current draft looks way better than I ever thought it would when I first started sketching it a few weeks back. This project has awakened a talent and a joy for art from long ago that I guess I forgot I possessed.

The graduate students listed the following challenges as “trials” they had to overcome to become successful at composing SAN texts:

- brainstorm an initial idea to write about that would be well-suited for the SAN medium
- learn how to think of narratives in terms of distinct visual panels and to script or map them out on a page
- overcome a self-conscious fear of drawing
• embrace the concept of a *dummy draft*, that revision is as important to illustration as it is to prose writing
• develop strategies for coping with subpar illustration skills (i.e., research drawing tutorials, recruit a better artist to assist, use technology software to illustrate the text, etc.)
• find sufficient time outside of class to complete the project (many participants confessed they largely underestimated how long the process would take)

The graduate students identified the following supports as useful scaffolds that helped them to develop strategies to overcome the aforementioned writing challenges:

• in-class practice exercises where two students worked together (one as the writer, one as the illustrator) to sketch a rough draft of an improvised story
• in-class practice exercises where students adapted a short, popular fairy tale or fable into a rough draft of a SAN text
• access to exemplars of SAN scripts and/or dummy drafts
• distributed assignment deadlines over several weeks with mid-draft instructor feedback at each point in the process
• the continuation of SAN reading assignments concurrent with the writing project to prompt new thinking about style and structure
• substantial amounts of in-class time provided for drafting and conferencing about the mini-narrative project
• access to a list of websites that provide SAN illustration software and time in-class to experiment with these programs
• the motivating factor of knowing that the SAN mini-narratives would be published/shared with the rest of the class at a celebration event at the end of the semester

The graduate students in this study felt their initiation into the third and final course competency, teaching sequential art narratives, was the one for which they felt the least prepared, largely because the summative assessment they identified for this competency was the pragmatic application of teaching a series of SAN-inspired lessons within a field teaching experience setting with actual middle school or high school students, while the trials they experienced in-class to help them practice for this outcome were largely theoretical in nature, such as discussions about instructional planning or how to use graphic novels to teach culture or history. In his post-teaching interview with me, Sawyer described these circumstances in the following manner:

I have learned an exceptional amount of new knowledge in this course, much more than I thought I would at the onset. And I feel pretty good about where I’ve arrived as
a reader and even a budding writer of these types of texts. But you don’t know what you don’t know until you are in front of a room full of adolescents looking to you for guidance. I don’t think I did wrong by them, but I clearly still have a lot to learn to be able to teach graphic novels as effortlessly as I can teach traditional books that I’m more comfortable with.

Sawyer was not alone in this sentiment. In their pre-teaching interviews with me, most graduate students expressed confidence in the lessons they were preparing, citing newfound knowledge and proficiency in reading and composing sequential art narratives as the source of that confidence. However, in their post-teaching interviews, many graduate students confessed that upon execution of their planned lessons, there were a number of areas they had to improvise, with mixed levels of success, due to a lack of anticipating those issues in the planning stages and/or knowing how to adequately address them when they arose. In hindsight based on these experiences, the following topics or practices are areas the graduate students in this study identified as topics or practices that would have enhanced their skillset prior to the act of teaching in an authentic setting:

- discussion of ways to adapt and differentiate SAN instruction for diverse learners, including English language
learner and Special Education students, students who struggle with visual learning styles, and students who struggle with or fear visual expression

- methods for providing students with an introduction to key SAN principles in a limited time-frame without the benefit of extensive background knowledge (like the McCloud text)
- opportunities to demonstrate sample lessons to and receive constructive criticism from course instructors and colleagues within the class
- strategies for integrating sequential art narrative reading or composition into existing English Language Arts studies rather than teaching graphic novels as a stand-alone unit

Despite the aforementioned challenges, the graduate students viewed the field teaching experience assignment as an integral part of their learning within the course.

In Campbell’s monomyth, once heroes successfully face their greatest challenge, they undergo an apotheosis, a personal expansion of consciousness that forever transforms the hero from the individual he or she was at the onset of the journey. While the graduate students in this study did not describe their own personal transformations in quite so grandiose terms, they all nevertheless acknowledged experiencing a profound amount of growth throughout
the course that had permanently impacted the way they would think about and use sequential art narratives (and literacy in general) in their future personal and professional lives. Below are statements from each of the case study participants when asked in their final interview with me how their thinking or practice had changed as a result of their learning in the course:

**Hien:** Manga novels were a big part of the reason I grew up loving to read, maybe why I even went into education. But at some point they disappeared from my life, along with my art projects, because they were seen to be distractions. In this class, I feel I have come home to my old self. I have a new passion to bring these things back into my life, and into my teaching. I know how powerful they can be. I want to be a teacher that opens doors, not shut them. And now I have tools and knowledge to help me keep those doors open.

**Jane:** Everything has changed for me. I think I’ve always known how important visual literacy is from my former work in business and marketing, but I guess I never really thought about those being tangible skills you would teach,
especially in an English classroom, where the focus should be on books. But literacy and literary analysis are so much more than that. There are so many ways to tell a story or send information in today’s society. I feel more convinced than ever that it’s my job as an English teacher to make sure my students are able to read, write, and think in any medium, including SANs. And now that I know how to help students in this area, I feel like I have a blueprint for becoming more knowledgeable about other media formats, too, like film or art now.

_Sawyer_: When I think back to what a fool I must have sounded like in these interviews at the beginning of this class, I’m rather embarrassed. Like any bigot, I was convinced of my own self-righteousness, that this juvenile form had nothing to offer me...or anyone else for that matter. I’d like to take my foot out of my mouth now. I’ve experienced first-hand how sophisticated these texts can be, how hard they are to create, and you’ve exposed me to all sorts of great new works of literature. Yes, you heard me, I do count graphic novels as literature now, and contrary to what I said before, I can clearly see how and
why one would use them in the English classroom. My eyes are now open; my awakening is complete. I look forward to what new adventures the future will bring.

**Junior High Students**

Though the students at Lincoln Junior High School described many of the same sequential art narrative instruction preferences, challenges, and learning outcomes as their graduate student counterparts at State University, the most distinguishing factor between the two groups was the level of variance in response witnessed in the junior high student group. Whereas the graduate students’ experiences were so similar that I could comfortably discuss them as a collective case study, a range of experiences existed within the junior high students, and I accordingly have selected six critical cases by which to examine the broad diversity of response that was represented in that population.

That such a variance exists is itself not unexpected. Despite differences in personal demographics, the graduate students shared a powerful homogenizing factor in that they were all academically successful English educators who voluntarily enrolled in a course they knew from the onset would focus solely on graphic novels. In contrast, the Lincoln Junior High students did not knowingly elect to
study sequential art narratives when signing up for their generic Reading Enrichment course and the population that emerged within that class represented a much broader range of socioeconomic status and academic achievement than the graduate student population.

The critical cases chosen from among the varied Lincoln Junior High student participants that are described in detail throughout the rest of this chapter include: David, Morgan, Ned, Regan, Max, and LaTanya. The omission of other cases should not be construed as a negative reflection on the value attributed to those experiences. All cases helped to shape the overall theory of effective sequential art narrative pedagogy that emerged from the study; however, the critical cases chosen for elaboration illustrate aspects of the themes reflected in the total collection of cases most vividly.

**David**

David was a male, ninth grade Caucasian student at the time of the study and he and his family were members of the Mormon faith. David had taken the Reading Enrichment course with me as an eighth grade student and was repeating the class for high school credit as a ninth grader because he enjoyed its workshop-based design. He also was simultaneously enrolled in my core ninth grade English course during the 2010-2011 academic year, so I was more familiar with
David as an individual and a student than any of the other junior high school subjects in the study. David was a fervent reader, particularly within the genre of science fiction, and was also an enthusiastic gamer who was especially enthralled with video games within the HALO and Star Wars universes. When I first met David in 2009, he was a reluctant writer, but by the time of the study in April 2011, he had blossomed into a fluent and proficient writer who submitted original short stories to creative writing contests for students. Though his literacy skills were fairly average for his age, he was a model student who diligently followed teacher instructions, consistently submitted quality assignments by required due dates, and frequently and voluntarily participated in course discussions. He emerged as an unofficial student leader in the course, though in non-academic social settings he tended to keep to himself and read or complete coursework.

Though David maintained a personal preference for prose novels throughout the graphic novel unit (in part because they “let the reader create their own images of the story”), David thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to read SAN texts in the classroom. He was fairly familiar with the medium, having previously read several graphic novels on his own and having spent the summer between third and fourth grade reading “every Calvin and Hobbes comic strip ever published.” He
noted that the graphic novel unit was particularly interesting, though, because it taught him ways to more deeply read SAN texts by helping him pay attention to concepts like ‘paneling’ that he had never consciously noticed before.

David chose to read *Superman: Red Son* as his independent graphic novel, a dystopian text that proposes an alternate reality where Superman lands in the Soviet Union as a baby instead of the United States of America. He chose the book due to its science fiction overtones and its thematic ties to *Animal Farm*, a text he had recently finished reading in his core 9th grade English course. David repeatedly emphasized in his exit interview the value that being able to choose his own graphic novel to study added to his learning experience. “I had more interest in [*Superman: Red Son*] because I got to choose it myself. I was open to all of the books we read in class, but I was less interested in the ones you forced us to read.”

David’s reading journal entries (an assignment, found in Appendix F, which required students to record their reflections in response to generic, SAN-themed prompted questions about their independent reading) bore witness to this testimony, as they showed evidence of thorough, active, and enthusiastic reading. For example, in response to a prompt that asked students to discuss the level of visual abstraction used in their self-selected books, Jacob wrote:
Superman: Red Son has a mixed approach to abstraction. On the one hand, the pictures are very detailed, showing you actual historical people and places from the Soviet Union like Stalin and making changes to the way Superman looks, like putting the hammer and anvil logo on his chest. In that sense, it’s kind of like watching a movie with real-life actors and settings. But the pictures are also pretty stylish, too, especially the use of bright colors. This makes it look more like a cartoon, which I think is on purpose, because the writer wants you to remember that this is a sci-fi story about big ideas like communism and freedom and stuff. If it looked too real, you might forget that and get too wrapped up in the story.

David’s response shows that he had a solid grasp of how the concept of visual abstraction works, both in general and specifically in the text he read, from which he was able to draw on both specific details from the story as well as overarching themes and ideas. The academic quality of David’s reading journal entries was of the highest caliber of any such assignments submitted in the class.

Despite a stated preference for independently-chosen texts, David was actively engaged in all in-class reading assignments and formal discussions that accompanied those texts. As a 9th grader,
David was one of only four students who had the opportunity to engage in each of the different types of reading tasks designed for use throughout the full unit of instruction: independent reading, partner reading, small group reading, and full class reading [8th grade students did not get to participate in the small group reading of *Kings in Disguise* due to altered schedules as a result of state standardized testing that occurred during the unit of instruction]. David found the collaborative reading assignments to be of mixed value.

He acknowledged that the conversation that occurred between students during the act of collaborative reading exercises was beneficial because it allowed him to hear different perspectives that prompted him to think differently about the storyline or to notice visual details that he overlooked on his own. During his interview with me, he recounted one such particular moment while reading *The Arrival* with a partner (Ned). The two-page panel being discussed is reprinted below in Figure 6.
“Early on while we were reading *The Arrival*, we came across the page with the dragon tails hanging menacingly over the immigrant family right before the father leaves home. That was the only panel on the entire page, and since we were being asked to pause and talk after each page, we had a lot of time to debate what we thought the dragon tails symbolized. I immediately thought they represented the corruption of the government they were trying to run away from – probably because we just got done reading *Animal Farm* in [English 9]. But Ned said he thought the dragon tails were a sign of poverty, that the family was trying to move to a new world to find a better life, like the immigrants he had been learning about in his American history class in 8th grade. The more we talked, the
more we decided they probably both were true, and as we kept reading the book, we found other details that backed up both ideas. But we probably would have missed some of those details if we hadn’t had a chance to share our different opinions about the dragon tails at the beginning of the book.”

David’s vivid recollection of this specific exchange of ideas clearly illustrates the value that peer collaboration contributed to his reading experience of this particular text.

However, David also expressed frustration with collaborative reading structures, particularly the small group reading experience, largely because of reading pace differences that emerged among partners or group members. He felt pressured to speed up his own reading (sometimes skipping the last few panels of a page) in order to keep up with the pace set by other group members, and he was particularly irritated that one member (Morgan) disregarded the group altogether and read several pages in advance of everyone else. David suggested that an alternative instructional approach of having students read a collective text independently first and then meet afterwards to discuss what they read would have been preferable, though acknowledged that the conversations that would have transpired in such a setting may have been less panel-specific than the
exchanges (like the one documented above) that occurred in the immediate act of reading.

When it came to composing SAN texts, David expressed a definite preference for what he described as “translating” existing texts into the SAN medium. Two of the four total SAN writing tasks assigned during the unit required this approach – the adaption of a scene from the script of Hamlet into a SAN page and the adaptation of a poem into a visual-verbal format; but David also voluntarily chose to adapt existing source material (his own science fiction short story) for the other two SAN composition assignments (the digital ToonDoo comic strip and his original SAN mini-narrative). During his interview, he expressed that “it was easier for me to start right off the bat doing something I knew was going to work” rather than spend time trying to think up a quality new story while simultaneously attempting to juggle the demands of composing within an unfamiliar medium. Indeed, David engaged in SAN composition tasks more expeditiously when he was adapting an existing verbal text rather than originating a new narrative; this finding aligns with research that suggests that transmediation exercises can improve a student’s ability to produce communication within a new medium (Suhor 1984; Seigel 1995; Semali & Fueyo 2001).
David remarked that writing SAN texts was substantially different from writing prose, in part because, “you have to change your style of writing in a graphic novel, because you draw a lot of what you would normally write out in words.” When adapting his own short story into a SAN format, he acknowledged that he had to cut a significant amount of the dialogue and description from his source material in order to break it down into a manageable amount of content to work with. He also described that his SAN writing process required him to “think of [the story] in pictures” and to “think more in segments,” processes that he normally did not utilize when writing in prose (though he confessed that by the end of the unit, he found himself transferring those processes to other forms of writing, too).

Although David enjoyed experimenting with SAN composition software, he preferred illustrating his SAN texts by hand because “the software didn’t have enough variety to be able to write the story I wanted to write.” He explained that, despite a lack of formal artistic training and a desire to improve his illustration skills, he was confident in his ability to draw images and that doing so was not an obstacle to creating his own SAN texts. Overall, he found the composition process to be “slow and tedious” but enjoyable and rewarding.

David’s SAN composition (featured below in Figure 7) itself reflected these viewpoints. David planned for a multi-page adaption of
Figure 7: Student SAN Composition Excerpt (David)

Attention all personnel, the engines have been destroyed. Prepare to be boarded.

Weapons

Yes, we're all dead. Come on boys, let's go blast these aliens back to where they came from!

Yes Sir. We're all dead.
his own science fiction short story, but was unable to complete the full scope of the project in the time allotted, despite consistent productivity during in-class workshop time and considerable time spent on the assignment at home. He reluctantly asked permission to submit a partially-completed narrative as his final draft, and Jane granted that permission. The draft he turned in showed evidence of careful planning/execution, a minimalist treatment of its source material (David opted to cut out much of the non-essential dialogue or descriptions from his original prose, which was several pages in length), and a proficient – though rather conventional – application of SAN principles (i.e., consistent use of standard paneling format, medium framing size, and neutral perspective in encapsulation). The professional, edited appearance of the composition distinguished it from other submissions, though it lacked some of the sophistication (both visual complexity and literary complexity) that other students’ less polished texts possessed. This was probably a result of both having too much source material to adapt (the need to produce more panels led to less time for experimentation) as well as David’s insistence on meticulous illustration.

Overall, David found the SAN composition assignments to be the most beneficial instruction within the unit as a whole. He described how the process of learning to write SAN texts changed the way in
which he increasingly read them: “It allowed me to appreciate [SANs] more. Instead of it just being a bunch of pictures strewn together with words, instead now you get to see ‘oh this is hard, this is tough,’ ... you get a new respect for it.”

**Morgan**

Morgan was a female, eighth grade Caucasian student during the time of this study. Prior to enrolling in Lincoln Junior High School during the 2010-2011 year, she had exclusively attended a small, Christian parochial school for her K-8 education. Morgan was a college-level reader and a talented writer from the onset of the course. She enjoyed participating in class discussions and offered original, analytical responses to questions that were posed. However, at times Morgan would neglect certain course assignments or activities that she deemed “pointless,” particularly journal assignments about the books she was reading independently, and she would express frustration to the instructors about the slow pace of learning or what she perceived to be an excessive amount of scaffolding within a particular lesson. Outside of school, Morgan was an accomplished photographer whose work was regionally recognized.

Morgan expressed considerable enthusiasm for studying sequential art narratives, in both her post-instruction interview with
me and as evidenced by her level of high engagement throughout the unit. She commented:

In most courses, you only study books and every once in a while you will go to the computer lab and read something on the Internet. I liked the creative aspect of [this unit], the way that it let students see the other side of literature, where it doesn’t have to be just words, it can also incorporate visuals.

She especially appreciated the way that her instruction required her to formally study a medium she had only casually encountered in the past and to move beyond general comprehension of SAN texts to engage in rigorous analysis that required students “to really think about and dissect how and why these texts work.”

Though she had never studied graphic novels in school before, Morgan was no stranger to the medium; she enjoyed a number of Japanese manga series as leisure reading and estimated that she had read several dozen before the onset of this instructional unit. She chose the 5th volume of *Vampire Knight*, the newest edition of one such manga series, as her independent reading book. However, as the unit progressed, Morgan voluntarily began to borrow the independent reading graphic novels of several of her classmates, too, and had finished numerous books by the end of the unit, despite no academic
requirement to do so. Though her own self-selected graphic novel was much less demanding in terms of text complexity than her personal reading achievement level, the books she borrowed from her classmates and instructors tended to be more sophisticated (i.e. Pride of Baghdad, The Dark Knight Returns) and she seemed to be more impacted by those texts when discussing her overall experiences during her interview.

Morgan asserted that giving students the opportunity to choose their own graphic novels for independent reading was an impactful instructional design factor. She remarked:

"Free choice was very important. There are so many different styles of graphic novels. If you are forced into one that you don’t like, kids probably aren’t going to give it a second chance. They’re gonna be like, ‘I don’t like this style, so that means I’m not going to read any of these.’"

This observation proved to be true; most participants in the study exhibited considerably higher levels of engagement during reading of self-selected texts than reading of teacher-selected texts. Not surprisingly, much of the research that asserts that graphic novels are of high interest to students does so with an underlying assumption that such readers be given autonomy over specific text selection within the medium (Lyga & Lyga 2004; Smith & Wilhelm 2002).
Morgan also expressed a definite preference for individual reading as opposed to collaborative reading. She confessed that she felt self-conscious when asked to read/think aloud during the small group reading of *Kings in Disguise*. Most problematic, though, was the substantially faster pace at which Morgan could read and comprehend graphic novels in comparison to the majority of her classmates (a phenomenon she regularly experienced with prose texts, too). Despite explicit teacher instructions and collaboration structures designed to artificially slow down and standardize the reading process for the full class (during *The Arrival*) and a small group (during *Kings in Disguise*), Morgan consistently disregarded these methods and blazed ahead in her own independent reading, only stopping to engage in larger group discussion when explicitly drawn into that conversation by her instructor.

She confessed that “it was difficult to keep my reading straight while trying to keep track of where the rest of the class was,” a sentiment that was validated in my observations of those discussions, where Morgan’s contributions were markedly more befuddled than instances at other points within the unit where the class would analyze a particular panel or page taken in isolation from a graphic novel and projected on the Smartboard. Morgan was more successful in these latter instances because she was forced to slow down and analyze the
details of a particular page for a controlled amount of time, rather than have the option to continue reading ahead in the narrative, which proved to be too enticing a temptation to resist. The instructor used reciprocal processes for discussing visual thinking strategies (Yenawine 1998; Housen 2002) in both instances, but the technique was more effective when the instructor could limit students’ access and attention to a singular image.

While Morgan enjoyed the opportunity to read a diverse variety of graphic novels throughout the unit and leveraged her class time to do so more than any other student in the study, she argued that the most important instructional activities that she engaged in during the unit were the ones that required her to compose sequential art texts. She reflected:

It was really important to create comics as well as read them so that you could get a better understanding of what goes into [the medium]. Kind of like poetry, once you know what goes into it and how to make it yourself, you have a better appreciation and understanding for it. You get to see the other side of the looking glass...

Morgan’s metaphor effectively captured the essence of the instruction that accompanied these SAN composition assignments, as Jane
frequently asked students to “write with a reader in mind” as they experimented with various visual designs.

Students were first introduced to SAN composition at the onset of the unit during Sawyer’s series of lessons that led students through a process of adapting a scene from *Hamlet* into a visual-verbal format. Many students (understandably) struggled with the illustration component of this initial composition assignment and crafted very basic SAN texts, but Morgan sketched out a 4-page dummy draft with sophisticated design choices (featured below in Figure 8).

Figure 8: Student *Hamlet* Adaptation (Morgan)
Without any direct instruction or exemplar modeling regarding SAN concepts or visual composition principles having occurred yet at this point in the unit, Morgan already was making strategic and varied decisions about closure, paneling, and encapsulation (especially framing and perspective) as she skillfully interpreted her source material – the scene where the ghost of Hamlet’s father reveals how he was murdered – into an effective sequential art narrative.

Though Morgan did not yet possess the technical vocabulary by which to describe the SAN concepts she was using, she had nonetheless already become aware of their effect, most likely due to the rich array of personal, non-academic experiences she had encountered with visual media in her past, including her extensive history of manga leisure reading, her practice and success as an amateur photographer, and having an “artistic” mother who would talk about poster or advertisement design with her in casual conversation.

Morgan admitted in her interview with me that these previous experiences led her to be very comfortable with graphic novels from the onset of the unit and that, though she believed the unit as a whole “broadened [her] horizons and gave her a new perspective,” she didn’t feel that it made any profound changes to her own visual analysis or composition skills. However, she stated that “I think it would have if I wasn’t doing it already” and that she thought it was extremely
beneficial for a majority of her classmates, who she perceived as rarely having similar experiences in their own academic or personal lives.

She also appreciated the “break from the monotony of school” that this unit’s instructional design promoted, particularly its frequent opportunities for creative expression. Morgan created exemplary work in each of her SAN composition assignments, and she even volunteered to illustrate the SAN composition of another student in class (Jessica) who had created a dummy draft but was unable to visually execute a final product to her own satisfaction.

For her own original SAN composition, Morgan chose to adapt the William Carlos Williams poem, “The Act,” into a single-page sequential art narrative (Figure 9 below). Not surprisingly, given her artistic aptitude, Morgan chose to illustrate the text by hand. She told me, “I found [digital illustration software] to be kind of restricting. They had a lot of great options, more variety and choices than I expected, but as an artist, I couldn’t get exactly what I wanted, and that was a deal breaker.” Morgan waited to complete her final draft in class until after she had finished illustrating Jessica’s piece, and as a result her own submission was not as polished as it likely would have been had she not been rushing to finish it before the end of the period, but nevertheless, the final text was sophisticated in its application of visual composition techniques and markedly more advanced than the
Figure 9: Student SAN Composition (Morgan)
work submitted by most other students. Her visual design reflects a deep understanding of the thematic content of the source poem, as evidenced by her decision to gradually zoom into a close-up of an individual rose at the key line, “Agh, we were all beautiful once, she said...”, and to then slow down and accentuate the contentious act of cutting it by depicting it in a series of segmented, close-up panels that visually suggest the implied action alongside visual depictions of the sound effect (“SNiP”) associated with each individual use of the clippers. Dark drops of either the dying roses or the speaker’s own blood (the illustration leaves the source intentionally ambiguous) bleed off the bottom of the page during a suspenseful pause in verbal commentary until the final panel completes the poem (“...in my hand”) with an image of the silhouettes of the speaker and his female counterpart tragically facing opposite directions.

During her post-unit interview with me, Morgan shared this self-reflection on her SAN composition assignment:

I approached this task as if I was on a photography shoot. The words of the poem gave me a theme and direction, but then I let the visuals take it from there, and I tried to capture the key moments that were happening from the most interesting vantage points. I guess I never thought
before about how unique comics are in the way they really put pictures and words together like that.

Morgan’s revelation, as well as her application of that writing approach in her own SAN composition, is reminiscent of the relationship between words and pictures that McCloud describes in *Understanding Comics* when he says, “[They] are like partners in a dance where each one takes turns leading. / When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area. / On the other hand, if the words lock in the ‘meaning’ of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off” (156-59).

Morgan ended her interview by reiterating how important – and paradoxically, how neglected – she felt the teaching of visual thinking skills were for students in today’s society. She said, “Teens my age spend so much time watching TV and movies, playing video games, and looking at pictures online, that it’s kind of crazy we don’t spend time in our classes learning more about the ways those images affect us. I think [our teachers] did a good job of that this unit.”

**Ned**

Ned was a male, eighth grade Caucasian student during the time of this study. He was a percussionist in the school band and a founding member of the school’s anime club, where he frequently
displayed his talent for drawing using the manga style. Within the Reading Enrichment course, he was constantly reading independently-selected books, sometimes to the neglect of other instructional activities occurring in class. He was a reluctant writer, however, who avoided completing writing assignments until his grade in the class was adversely affected by the behavior, at which point he would rush to complete the minimal requirements needed to earn a “C” average. As the year progressed, Ned began to increasingly participate in course discussions, revealing a humorous wit.

Compared to previous units of instruction within the Reading Enrichment course, Ned’s enthusiasm for the graphic novels unit was pronounced. He was markedly more attentive and orally collaborative than when studying other types of literature, where he would frequently ignore the full class lesson in order to read a self-selected book. He was known to both his instructors and his peers to be an avid reader and writer of manga, and he took an active interest both in sharing his expertise with the rest of the class as well as learning new techniques associated with visual-verbal storytelling.

Despite his considerable experience, Ned did not possess the technical vocabulary associated with the SAN medium at the onset of the unit. Following Jane’s direct instruction on visual literacy concepts, though, Ned quickly adopted domain-specific language such as
'closure' and 'encapsulation' and began using it in conversations about his writing processes. In his post-unit interview, Ned shared:

It was really helpful to learn the official words for the different things that comic writers do and to see examples from books that are famous in the graphic novel world. We could see the different things the authors did and talk about those choices, and that gave me lots of new ideas for my own writing. I’ve never really been able to describe why I was doing the things I was doing when drawing manga before, but now that I know what those things are called, it’s a lot easier to talk about.

This description was similar to what Sawyer and other graduate students shared in regard to the value they placed on learning the technical vocabulary of the sequential art medium. Ned was one of only a handful of junior high school student participants, though, who began to incorporate this terminology into his written and verbal communication, perhaps because illustrating manga was a strong extracurricular passion for him thereby increasing the natural relevance of this domain-specific vocabulary.

Ned used his newfound vocabulary to actively engage in full-class analytical discussions of The Arrival and other graphic novel excerpts, in partner readings of The Arrival, and in independent
reading of his self-selected text, the manga novel *Mega Man* (inspired by the Japanese video game). Though his participation level in each approach was similar, Ned expressed a preference in his post-unit interview for reading graphic novels individually. He reflected, “When I read by myself, I can go at my own pace and think about what’s going on in the pictures without everyone else’s thoughts in my head.”

Upon further probing, he acknowledged that collaborative reading forced him to think about the text more and in different ways and ultimately concluded that a contrived reading rate during collaborative reading was the primary source of his frustration. “It seemed like we were lingering on every single page for just too long. We were focusing on each and every panel, which I thought was overkill.” Like David, Ned believed a better approach to collective reading would be to allow students to first read a pre-determined chunk of text independently and then engage in collaborative discussions about that reading.

Unlike David, Ned’s enthusiastic participation in conversations of reading assignments did not transfer to exemplary academic writings about those same reading assignments. Ned’s reading journal assignments were underdeveloped and not indicative of the level of analysis he demonstrated he could achieve when orally discussing those same types of questions (though they were similar in quality to
the academic writings he produced in previous units of instruction). Ned addressed this discrepancy in his interview by saying, “I really enjoyed reading and talking about the graphic novels we looked at, but it was boring when we had to write down stuff about them. That just seemed like a pointless hoop to jump through.” This comment illustrated the apparent limits on how far the natural appeal that Ned held for working with sequential art texts could go on its own merits to alter his traditional pattern of academic behavior.

Interestingly enough, Ned’s perspective on academic writing was in direct opposition, though, to his opinion about writing assignments throughout the unit that required him to create his own SAN texts. Ned continued:

But when we got to draw comics ourselves, that was really fun, because we could make them our own and think creatively. If we had just written about comics instead of drawing them, I wouldn’t have gotten as much out of it, because it’s all about working with your hands and understanding how you can make things work and how you can get others to understand it. And once you get your own ideas about how to make graphic novels, it sort of helps when you read them, too, because then you’re like ‘oh, so he’s doing this like I did’ or ‘hmm...he decided
to go a totally different direction, but wow, it’s better like that here.’ [Creating comics] broadens your thinking...

As suggested by his commentary, and in contrast to his academic writing performance, Ned was highly engaged in SAN composition throughout the unit, and his methodical work was indicative of a sophisticated understanding of visual literacy principles.

One such example from early in the graphic novel unit was Ned’s SAN adaptation of the scene from *Hamlet* (Figure 10) where the “not quite dead” Ghost of King Hamlet reveals the details of his murder most foul to his decidedly “not dead” son. The text depicts the characters with a manga-influenced style of illustration, abstracting them to iconic cartoons predominantly characterized by vivid emotional portrayals, such as the vengeful ghost, the melodramatic Hamlet, the “sad” shadowy people of Denmark, or the sinisterly “ebil” uncle (intentionally misspelled for comedic effect). Ned’s adaptation juxtaposes the authentic Elizabethan English lines of the play with witty modern American asides (young Hamlet’s recognition moment: “Holy Crap, my uncle?!”), resulting in a cohesively playful treatment of the source material, both verbally and visually. Yet there are also signs of insecurity at this early stage in his SAN writing, such as the inclusion of arrows to suggest the desired sequence of paneling to readers rather than trusting that the order is implied by his layout.
Figure 10: Student *Hamlet* Adaptation (Ned)
As Ned continued developing new SAN compositions, he abandoned the inclusion of superfluous navigational arrows and began experimenting with more sophisticated layouts that filled the entire page. Figure 11 features an in-class sketch that Ned drafted for a SAN adaptation of an original, Christianity-themed poem he had written earlier in the school year. Though he never produced a polished version of the text, the dummy draft shows evidence of innovative paneling that skillfully directs the reader’s eye across the page and effectively uses variations in perspective and framing to convey a sense of empathy and magnitude in readers concordant with the gravity of the scene being depicted (Christ’s crucifixion). The top half of the page is anchored by a pair of caddy corner close-ups featuring the face of a mortified onlooker; as readers’ eyes move diagonally from one panel to the other, they slide across an open-panel, close-up depiction of Christ outstretched on the cross with narration boxes containing the initial verses of the poem that articulate the onlooker’s shame. The bottom half of the page then features a single longshot panel that zooms out to depict the entire scene from afar, with the cross featured prominently in the center of the panel juxtaposed against the final line of the poem: “For while we were still sinners, you sent your son to die for us.”
Figure 11: Student Poem Adaptation (Ned)
Ned continued to experiment with different visual-verbal illustration techniques throughout the unit. His summative SAN composition project featured a multi-page original story where a pair of wolves engages in a tragicomic adventure while running away from their pack (Figure 12). Though the narrative quality of the story was simplistic, rushed, and underdeveloped (especially in comparison to earlier instances where he adapted existing high-quality work), the visual design that Ned employed was sophisticated. He used an abstracted style of illustration, emblematic of anime, to depict the various emotions his anthropomorphic characters experienced – which ranged from humorous teasing, to serious introspection, to shocked bewilderment, to angry vengefulness. His page layout was equally varied, utilizing close to a dozen different panels of varying shapes and sizes on each meta-panel, as well as an “open panel” backdrop image that transcended the meta-panel’s gutter on each page to suggest an overarching tone for each page (a technique he cited as having learned during Jane’s visual literacy exemplar lessons). Like Ned’s earlier SAN composition assignments, this text was also highly effective at using paneling and lettering in strategic, complimentary ways to naturally guide readers’ attention across the various elements found within each page.
Figure 12: Student SAN Composition (Ned)

[Comic page with text and drawings]
In his post-unit interview, Ned validated what his SAN compositions and classroom interactions seemed to suggest – that he found this unit of instruction to be exceptionally engaging and impactful. When asked why that was the case in comparison to previous units within the Reading Enrichment course, he described a disconnect between the visual-heavy media that he inexhaustibly consumed outside of school and the almost total absence of any visual texts in a regular English classroom. “It was really cool to be able to spend time in school doing the types of stuff I normally only get to do on my own, and to like, actually learn how to do it better.”

Regan

Regan was a female, eighth grade Caucasian student at the time of this study. She was an athlete who competed on three of the school’s seasonal sports teams and was a bubbly, outgoing, and popular member of the “in crowd” at Lincoln Junior High School. She possessed average literacy skills and enjoyed leisure reading, but preferred to socialize with other class members when given the opportunity to discuss the latest Justin Bieber drama. She enjoyed providing comic relief to the other members of the Reading Enrichment course and rarely took her studies very seriously, including her work within the sequential art narrative unit. I have included Regan’s
experiences in the study as a “negative case” (Corbin & Strauss 2008), one that serves as a foil to the majority of other cases and appears to contradict patterns or explanations that emerged from data analysis.

Regan had no experience prior to this unit of instruction reading graphic novels or other sequential art texts, though she likened the experience to watching cartoons on television when she was younger. She chose Chynna Clugston’s Queen Bee as her independent reading book, a graphic novel about a female middle schooler trying to earn acceptance into a popular clique known as the “Hive”. Regan was actively engaged in reading the text during periods of independent reading time, and her reading journal assignment entries and in-class conferencing with Jane revealed a thorough understanding of and avid enthusiasm for the text. She shared that she liked it because “it was funny” but also that it “dealt with a lot of the same social issues that my friends and I go through;” however, she shared that she would have preferred that the text had taken the form of a regular prose novel or a non-animated television show because she found the “cartoon illustrations to be kind of silly.”

Unlike most of the other students in the class, Regan did not experience similar levels of success or engagement when asked to participate in collaborative readings of teacher-selected graphic novels. Regan feigned participation during the initial full-class reading of The
Arrival; she did not contribute or appear to be listening to the full-class discussion of the text and her eyes were often staring at various places around the classroom rather than analyzing the pages in front of her. When Jane transitioned students into partner readings for the remainder of the text, Regan and Peyton were the only duo within the class who largely disregarded the assignment and engaged in off-task social conversation rather than a shared interpretation of the narrative. They would comply when redirected by the instructor, but would shortly return to their off-task behavior once Jane was outside of their immediate proximity. In her post-unit interview with me, Regan came to this same conclusion without prompting; she reflected, “It was fun reading with a partner, but I think I was more focused when I read by myself. I tend to get off track when I’m around other people.” She also acknowledged that she was not nearly as interested in the subject matter of the teacher-selected texts as she was in Queen Bee and believed that a lack of individual choice in the former further contributed to the variance in her engagement levels.

Regan also exhibited a low level of interest and application in the direct instruction she received on SAN visual literacy concepts and in the various SAN composition activities that were implemented throughout the unit of instruction (a characteristic that again was atypical of the majority of students in the study). Though she
completed each task – largely, she confessed to me during her interview, because each assignment had to be submitted for a participation grade – she rushed through each project, spending virtually no time brainstorming or organizing a dummy draft in the pre-writing stages before immediately sketching the first thought that came to mind, which itself became the final draft with no further revision. Regan used a minimalist approach to paneling and a high level of abstraction in her illustration, though her composition choices appeared to be driven more by efficiency than by intentionally thought-out visual design principles.

For example, her Hamlet adaptation (Figure 13) features a single, full-page panel despite a variety of sequentially separate actions being depicted as occurring simultaneously within it; it features a single word balloon of text despite several dozen lines of dialogue within the source material; and it features a “stick person” depiction of characters with minimal additional imagery (with the exception of a fairly detailed yet comparatively unnecessary flower bed backdrop for the scene). Regan finished this draft in less than fifteen minutes, while the majority of her colleagues used close to the entire fifty-minute class period to develop and polish their work. She did not exhibit any behaviors that suggested she was intrinsically motivated by the task.
Regan’s rushed approach to composition was consistent both when illustrating by hand and when using digital software to generate images. She completed her ToonDoo comic strip in under ten minutes with minimal manipulation of the limited number of stock images and text boxes she employed; she then spent the rest of the workshop period socializing with her peers, at times distracting them from their work at hand and at times offering unsolicited feedback about their compositions that tended to gently mock their results with comments such as “Ha – look at the goofy look on your [character]” or “that looks so cheesy.” In doing so, Regan continued to articulate underlying stereotypes she seemed to be holding against the SAN medium as a whole and also appeared to be using humor and teasing
as a way to delegitimize the importance of the work and thereby mask potential feelings of inadequacy she was feeling.

All of these observations align with the self-assessment that Regan provided in her post-unit interview: “I didn’t really get into the comic-making assignments; it’s just not my thing. But I did like them better than our normal writing assignments, because they were easier to do and I could get them done faster.”

Regan put more effort into her final SAN composition (Figure 14) than her earlier projects, though she still exhibited many of the same writing behaviors as noted above. Her composition was an original, two-page illustrated biography of teen musician Justin Bieber (an idol of hers at the time who was a frequent topic of conversation for Regan). A notable difference from earlier work was the amount of prose that she incorporated into her writing for this assignment. Rather than break that prose into separate narration boxes across a number of panels, though, Regan chose to block it together in a single column that spanned the middle of the page because “it was easier to keep the words all together [than to separate them]” and “I wanted [the words] front and center since they are more important than my pictures.” She then divided the remaining left-hand and right-hand columns into large, image-exclusive panels with generic illustrations of the subject matter of the corresponding prose in the center column.
Figure 14: Student SAN Composition Excerpt (Regan)

This decision led to a relatively low level of synergy within the text’s visual-verbal interactions, a trend consistent with the lack of visual design techniques found in Regan’s other work and in contrast to the majority of SAN composition assignments submitted by other students. Nevertheless, her final composition was unquestionably a more sophisticated visual text than her earlier works and indicated at least some level of growth in her visual storytelling capacities.

For her part, though, Regan was not self-aware of any perceived literacy growth over the course of the instructional unit. During her
interview, she struggled to articulate any specific ways that she had benefited from a study of graphic novels, ultimately setting on “it was interesting” as an overall assessment of her learning. She shared that she likely would not seek out additional graphic novels to read moving forward, though she claimed she would not be opposed to reading a “really good one, like Queen Bee,” if made aware of it, meaning that she could overlook her distaste for the form if the content of a particular narrative was interesting enough to warrant it.

**Max**

Max was a male, eighth grade Caucasian student at the time of this study. He admitted early in the academic year that he only enrolled in Reading Enrichment because he viewed it as the “least undesirable” elective course he would be forced to take. Max virtually never spoke in class and only minimally conversed with instructors during individual conferencing. He was a hard-core video gamer who often struggled to stay awake in the first-period course after having stayed up most of the night playing games. He engaged in independent reading, often with a Stephen King horror novel in hand, but otherwise rarely participated in course activities or completed course assignments, despite possessing a failing grade in the course due to these inactions. Max consented to participate in the research
study, but he did not consent to an individual post-unit interview with me, so a description of his case is limited to my observations of his interactions within class and the work he submitted.

Max selected the dystopian graphic novel, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, as his independent reading choice, perhaps because Jane had suggested that the then recent and popular film, *The Dark Knight*, was heavily influenced by this SAN forerunner. Though he did not complete any of the journal writing assignments associated with that task and provided only short, awkward oral responses to the instructors who attempted to conference with him individually about his reading, Max appeared to be thoroughly engaged in the text, to the point that he read it virtually non-stop in class the week that it was given to him, largely ignoring the instruction on visual literacy concepts that Jane was intermittently providing between scheduled opportunities for independent reading. This behavior of reading a self-selected text while ignoring other instruction was typical of how Max had interacted throughout the year in Reading Enrichment, though this was the first time that he was observed reading a graphic novel instead of a prose text.

However, Max also appeared to engage in the full-class reading of *The Arrival*, which was atypical of his behavior in other instructional units, where he would often choose to sleep during full class activities.
While he did not ever contribute to the full-class conversation about *The Arrival*, his body language and eye contact suggested he was actively listening to the discussion, and he kept pace with turning the pages of his book with his classmates. Whether it was the novelty or the complexity of a book where meaning-making relied so heavily on visual context, this graphic novel seemed to capture his attention and elicit engagement where traditional prose texts had failed to do so at earlier points in the year.

When asked to transition to a partner-reading of *The Arrival*, though, Max was reluctant to seek out a companion. Jane eventually took the initiative to pair him with another student (Peter) who did not have a partner, but that student did the vast majority of the talking in their group, despite attempts on his part to elicit commentary from Max. As the literacy activity continued, though, Max slowly began to offer short sentences of insight to his partner (i.e., “Yeah, I think that’s what [the author] was going for by drawing the dragon tails”) that revealed he was actively listening to him and thinking critically about the text, though he noticeably clammed up whenever the instructor (Jane) was in close proximity and paying attention to their discussion. When the class transitioned back into a full-group discussion of the graphic novel at the end of the period, Max did not make any contributions. His averseness to oral participation seemed
to stem from extreme introversion and not a lack of interest or enthusiasm for the thinking required by the academic task itself.

Max’s reluctance to participate was also observed in many of the individual SAN composition activities that occurred throughout the unit, too, though, implying that social awkwardness was not the only factor that led him to choose not to engage in various learning tasks. After ostensibly listening to Sawyer set the scene for *Hamlet* and play an audio recording of the script, Max did not attempt either the paraphrasing or storyboarding activities for which Sawyer provided extensive amounts of class time. On the last day of his workshop, Sawyer became aware of this fact, and insistently (though empathetically) pressed Max to work on the project, a request that Max ultimately complied with, though at a simplistic level that featured no verbal elements whatsoever and only basic, highly-abstracted visual elements (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Student *Hamlet* Adaptation (Max)
Max did not submit anything at all when asked later in the unit by Jane to adapt an original poem into a sequential art format. Unlike Sawyer’s Shakespeare assignment, this activity took place within a single day, and Max was largely able to remain unnoticed by Jane while he spent class time reading *The Dark Knight Returns* instead of working on the SAN composition assignment.

When Hien came to introduce students to digital forms of comic-making (ToonDoo), however, a marked difference was observed in Max, who actively engaged in the digital composition activity without an instructor pressing him to do so. Max largely ignored the tutorial and modeling that Hien provided, but he immediately began to experiment with the software himself and spent the full class period designing and perfecting a series of humorous comic strips involving the Grim Reaper (that unfortunately cannot be replicated because they were never collected by the instructor). Given that course grades did not historically provide extrinsic motivation for Max to complete assignments, it can be reasonably inferred that he found this particular task to be intrinsically motivating.

This apparent preference and enthusiasm for digital composition also carried over to Max’s original SAN composition project (Figure 16), where again Max readily participated in the writing process despite a yearlong pattern of established behaviors that would suggest
he would do otherwise. Max chose to adapt the opening audio
prologue of one of his favorite video games (*Elder Scrolls*) into a
sequential art format, using original screenshots that he took while
playing the game to illustrate three pages’ worth of various panels.
Max used his own self-selected software program (Microsoft Word) to
compose his text. In approaching the process of encapsulation in such
a manner, Max was obviously limited to using a relatively finite
number of existing images that he could find within the game rather
than pictures he truly fashioned himself, though his final text shows
evidence that he was able to repurpose those images in a fairly
effective manner, similar to the way the writer of a found poem
appropriates the language of others. Max’s composition (Figure 16)
pays attention to the way that changes in content, perspective, and
coloring between screenshots impact readers across the overall meta-
panel; his individual panels are complimentary to one another. Max
was also intentional with his use of verbal source material, dividing
that text into phrases defined more by their potential for visual
interplay and closure than by aural rhythm and by choosing a font for
his lettering that visually elicited an appropriate aural tone for his text.
The final product was remarkable not only for its general effectiveness,
but for its very existence – it was the only major writing assignment
that Max submitted within the Reading Enrichment class all year.
Figure 16: Student SAN Composition Excerpt (Max)

I sing a song of ancient Tamriel

A home to Men and Mer
and other beasts, to emperors

And Daedra Lords as well

Of meek Argonians and Proud Khajiits

I sing of Urial Septim
and the Blades

And red cloaked assassins of the Mythic Dawn
Given the richness of this particular case study, it is regrettable that Max did not consent to participate in a post-unit interview to articulate his own personal learning outcomes and preferences. However, based upon my aforementioned observations of his interactions in class and the work he submitted, I feel it is appropriate to conclude that Max shared the sentiments expressed by many of his classmates regarding an increased interest in this particular medium of study, a preference for individual choice in reading, and an appreciation for the opportunity to compose original SAN texts (when allowed to do so using digital tools).

LaTanya

LaTanya was a female, eighth grade African-American student at the time of this study. Within the Reading Enrichment course, LaTanya was respectful of her instructors and colleagues and generally engaged in instructional discussions or activities; however, outside of class, she often got into verbal altercations with other eighth grade female students and a handful of Lincoln Junior High School faculty members, which resulted in a number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. During her frequent absences from class, LaTanya rarely kept up with her coursework, resulting in numerous disruptions to her instruction, a high percentage of uncompleted assignments, and a
failing grade in the course. Despite these circumstances and her below-grade-level literacy skills, LaTanya seemed to enjoy the Reading Enrichment course and regarded it as somewhat of a safe haven from her other troubles.

LaTanya conveyed that she had no previous literacy experiences with sequential art narratives prior to this instructional unit “except for, like, watching a bunch of cartoons on TV.” In her post-unit interview with me, she described herself as having taken an active interest in the novelty of the art form. She explained:

[Reading SANs] was cool because it was so different. It was like learning to do a puzzle or something. But like pretty much everyone in class was doing it for like the first time, too, so you didn’t feel dumb if you didn’t know what was going on all the time. And the pictures made it easier to figure stuff out, so it was fun, kinda like a game.

LaTanya also suggested that she felt better able to be a contributing member to class discussions during this particular unit because she found the texts to be more accessible than other media or genres studied up to that point in Reading Enrichment, and that she therefore had more confidence in her contributions.

When choosing an independent novel to read for the unit, LaTanya made a rather unconventional choice by selecting *Hana-Kimi,*
a Japanese manga series about a Japanese girl who disguises herself as a boy in order to enter the all-male high school where her love interest attends. LaTanya admitted that she did not investigate the text at all herself before selecting it, basing her pick entirely on the recommendation of another girl in class (Kendel) who “reads this stuff all the time.” LaTanya found the book to be humorous and persevered with completing the full novel, but she seemed to have difficulty comprehending the text as she read (particularly the backwards design conventions of the manga format), often interrupting Kendel’s own independent reading to ask her to explain the plot or answer questions. In her post-unit interview with me, LaTanya said that “sometimes the pictures helped me figure out what was going on, but sometimes they were confusing, like I couldn’t figure out the order they were supposed to go in.” The short reading conferences that LaTanya had with her instructor (Jane) similarly revealed a surface level understanding of the text that lacked much textual support or analysis. LaTanya did not complete her assigned journal writing prompts in response to her reading.

Despite these struggles, LaTanya professed enthusiasm for independent reading. “I liked reading on my own, cause if you’re reading something you don’t want to read, then you’re not that interested in it and don’t pay attention to it.” However, LaTanya also
was appreciative of opportunities to read with a partner in class and found it to be beneficial to her learning. She confessed:

I like to talk to other people when I read cause it helps me get into the story more and figure stuff out that doesn’t make sense on its own. But like with [graphic novels] it was extra helpful cause your partner would point out stuff in the pictures that you, like, totally hadn’t seen before and that could change your mind about what was really happening in the story.

LaTanya’s participation in the full-class and partner readings of *The Arrival* was indicative of this type of active collaboration and inquiry. She and her partner (Chiamaka) would constantly make visual observations and ask questions of one another, and their collective comprehension of that text was stronger than their individual demonstrated understandings of their independently-read texts.

LaTanya shared similar sentiments when it came to composing SAN texts. She explained, “When writing, I was doing my own thing but always with a group of people so that when I got stuck or wanted help I could see if my ideas were making sense.” This description was consistent with my observations of how she used her time within writing workshop settings. LaTanya appeared to benefit from having frequent informal opportunities to elicit feedback from her instructor or
colleagues while undergoing the process of writing. And despite an emphatic description of herself as “NOT artistic,” LaTanya thoroughly enjoyed each experience in which she was asked to create a SAN text and took her work seriously.

One such example is LaTanya’s SAN adaptation of an original love poem (Figure 17). Though fairly simplistic in design, it utilizes effectively abstracted symbolism and some innovative approaches to lettering. In her first panel, the narrated line “My Heart Longs For You” is paired with an illustrated heart that is divided down the middle by a jagged line that starkly casts half of the image in a deep melancholy blackness. In the next panel, the heart is literally breaking as its bottom border contorts and dislodges and entire pieces fall out of its center leaving black holes in their wake, while the next line of the poem (“My Soul dies for you”) is displayed diagonally across the corner of the panel in a jagged narration box that matches the visual style and verbal tone displayed throughout the rest of the panel. LaTanya further experiments with the innovative use of narration boxes in the rest of the composition, inverting one box such that the words within it mirror the tears falling from the speaker’s eyes, or using a series of dashes instead of solid lines in another box to emphasize the “emptiness” of the speaker’s arms.
Figure 17: Student Poem Adaptation (LaTanya)
Though she produced proficient compositions by hand, LaTanya expressed a definite preference for using computer software (ToonDoo) to illustrate her SAN texts. She cited efficiency (the speed in which panels could be illustrated), spontaneity (being able to easily try out different approaches), and inspiration (having pre-existing images to spur brainstorming) as significant benefits to the digital composition method. She explained:

Drawing my own comics was kind of easy, but I just couldn’t get it on the paper, exactly what I meant. With the computer, I could pick out the pictures, from all the ideas and designs you could make. You could express what you were thinking way better with the stuff they had, because if you can’t draw, then you get stuck. I couldn’t always find exactly what I wanted on the computer, but I found enough to make it work. But on paper, I would get stuck and couldn’t really fix it.

LaTanya created several, mostly humorous comic strips using ToonDoo during her digital writing workshop with Hien and planned to use the same software to illustrate her original SAN composition project.

Unfortunately, LaTanya received in-school suspension during the last week of the instructional unit when students were working on this assignment and was not permitted to use a computer in that setting.
Her family did not have a computer at home, either, so she was unable to proceed with the project as planned. However, she did complete the assignment in the solitude of in-school suspension (an atypical action on her part). Her submitted draft (Figure 18) is an original, 2-page story of a girl who is affected by her best friend’s apparent suicide. The text uses frequent, standardized panels, minimal text, and a high level of visual abstraction (that LaTanya revealed was a concession to her limited drawing abilities rather than a deliberate artistic choice). LaTanya struggled with effectively achieving closure for readers at points throughout the text, as her intended plot (a girl writes a suicide letter but doesn’t go through with the act because of love for her friend) is not clearly discernable from other possible interpretations (i.e., the suicide actually occurred and the friend is being haunted by the dead girl’s ghost or by her own depression/madness). This ambiguity is due to sudden and significant jumps in the narrative from panel to panel and a lack of verbal narration to help guide readers’ interpretations. However, the composition does show some sophisticated applications of encapsulation, with perspective and framing being strategically varied from panel to panel to convey a particular tone and thematic emphasis. Overall, the text shows evidence of a growing awareness of SAN composition principles and visual literacy strategies.
Figure 18: Student SAN Composition (LaTanya)
When asked to reflect on her learning during her post-unit interview, LaTanya remarked:

At first I only thought of graphic novels as superhero stories, but now it’s really been broadened in my mind. Whatever you can do with a regular book, you can do with a graphic novel. You just show instead of tell…”

She went on to explain that learning how to read graphic novels had impacted the way she was better understanding the design principles used in a variety of visual images she was encountering in other media, too, such as posters and music videos. As the discussion shifted to talking about the specific measures that her teachers had used to try to help her learn about graphic novels, LaTanya reiterated her point of view on the importance of peer collaboration in learning and also articulated the importance of having students be composers of SAN texts themselves. She advised, “Some kids have to do it to learn it. If you actually have to use your hands, that’s a good way to teach it.”

Summary of the Cases Studied

This chapter described the critical cases that were observed during the research study. It included a multi-case analysis of the relatively similar experiences of the three graduate students (Jane,
Sawyer, and Hien) who served as both students at State University and instructors in a field experience at Lincoln Junior High School and who described their learning as a transformative journey into a new medium where growth was fostered through mentorship with other readers/writers and through projects that required individual application of new skills. The chapter also included the independent analyses of six junior high school student cases that collectively illustrate the diverse set of experiences encountered within that instructional setting, ranging from highly impactful (David, Morgan, and Ned) to abnormally engaging (Max, LaTanya) to largely ineffective (Regan). These cases yielded important insights into answering the study’s research questions (described in Chapter 5) and developing a theory of effective pedagogy for sequential art narrative instruction (described in Chapter 6) through a process of explanation building that compared the findings of each case against a theoretical proposition that was adapted to account for the totality of cases being studied.
CHAPTER FIVE:
FINDINGS – RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Impact on Understanding/Attitude/Aptitude
Impact on Visual/Verbal Interaction
Impact of SAN Vocabulary/Concept Instruction
Impact of Manner of Reading SANs
Impact of Process for Composing SANs

This research study investigated how various instructional techniques impact the manner in which students learn to effectively read and compose sequential art narratives. The study tracked the experiences of six graduate students learning to read, write, and teach graphic novels over the course of a semester-length seminar, as well as the experiences of twelve junior high school students who participated in a four-week, introductory instructional unit to graphic novels taught by three of the graduate students within a field experience setting.

The research study sought to answer the following central question: “How do the pedagogical decisions made during a study of sequential art narratives affect students’ abilities to critically engage when reading and composing within the medium? What theory emerges as a model of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students?”
In order to answer this overarching question and develop the aforementioned theory of effective instructional practice, several sub-questions were employed to examine the impact that specific factors related to instructional design had upon student learning. This chapter will examine each of those sub-questions, attempting to link the findings from the critical cases observed within the study (Chapter 4) to the existing body of professional literature surrounding sequential art narrative instruction (Chapter 2), in an effort to draw meaningful and innovative conclusions to each question, which in turn will help to shape the overall theory of sequential art narrative instruction that will be described in my research conclusions (Chapter 6).

1) *Impact on Understanding/Attitude/Aptitude*

The study’s first sub-question investigated: “How (if at all) do students’ understanding of, attitude towards, and aptitude for verbal literacy, visual literacy, and sequential art narratives as a distinct type of text change throughout the course of the unit?”

The findings in this study largely affirm the body of existing research that suggests that the use of graphic novels and other sequential art narratives in the classroom generally increases student engagement and achievement in regard to verbal literacies (Annett 2008, Bitz 2004, Krashen 2004, Carter & Evensen 2011. Fisher & Frey
2004, Lyga & Lyga 2004, Yang 2008, Gorman 2003, Smith & Wilhelm 2002, Krashen 2004, Seyfried 2008, Serchey 2008). The graduate student participants in this study, as scholars of English Education, all already exhibited high levels of aptitude and enthusiasm for verbal literacy prior to the study; though they were highly engaged in reading, writing, and oral collaboration throughout the study, this behavior was largely to be expected. However, there were noticeable gains in verbal literacy within the junior high school students who participated in the study, who represented a much more varied pool of subjects in this regard, as only a third of these students were considered high-achieving in terms of academic achievement at the onset of the study.

For example, a higher level of student engagement in both group and individual reading assignments was observed among the junior high students during the graphic novel unit compared to previous units of instruction within the Reading Enrichment course (that previously featured other types of texts, like fictional and nonfictional prose and theatrical scripts). Most junior high school students within the study made a point to comment during their post-unit interviews that they found reading graphic novels to be exceptionally engaging because the medium was more accessible and more typical of the types of visual texts they read in everyday life. Morgan described the unit as a
“break from the monotony of school” while Ned commented that it was “really cool to be able to spend time in school doing the types of [reading] I normally only get to do on my own.” These comments are consistent with findings by Lyga & Lyga (2004) that graphic novels are of high interest to students due to their visual nature and therefore more likely to be read, by Yang (2008) that graphic novels bridge the gap between media we watch and media we read, and by Gorman (2003) that the familiar visual nature of sequential art narratives help readers to feel more confident and find more relevance while reading within this medium.

Higher verbal literacy engagement rates were especially prevalent among typically reluctant readers and writers in the Lincoln Junior High School course. Max submitted an end-of-unit of writing assignment and participated in full-class and small group reading discussions, despite rarely doing so in other units of instruction throughout the year; his increased participation and interest in this type of text were consistent with success stories Smith & Wilhelm (2002) encountered with adolescent males with similar profiles as Max. LaTanya also exhibited higher levels of engagement and comprehension than normal and remarked during her exit interview that since “pretty much everyone in class was [learning to read SANs] for like the first time, too, you didn’t feel dumb if you didn’t know what
was going on all the time. And the pictures made it easier to figure stuff out, so it was fun, kinda like a game.” Annett (2008) similarly found that lower-level readers are significantly more engaged and successful when reading graphic novels compared to traditional texts due to the contextual clues provided by the visual nature of SANs, and Krashen (2004) and Carter and Evensen (2011) found that student vocabulary acquisition in particular benefited from these attributes.

In addition to (or perhaps because of) an increase in student engagement in verbal literacy tasks during the graphic novel unit, Lincoln Junior High School students in this study also exhibited increases in student achievement related to verbal literacy learning outcomes. Students’ academic journal writing scores, the primary assessment used to evaluate student reading competency during the unit, improved by an average of 15 percentage points when compared to similar assignments in previous units of instruction. Jane, who evaluated the student writing, noted that the main improvement in student work was an increase in the amount of analytical thinking and textual evidence that students provided in response to the journal prompts. Most students also experienced a 10% or better increase in their original SAN composition grades (when compared to other end-of-unit creative composition assignments throughout the year), due to higher marks in the areas of “organization” and “development.” Bitz
(2004) and Fisher and Frey (2004) found similar improvements in their own students’ writing after extensive study of graphic novels within their respective classrooms.

In addition to the aforementioned advancements in verbal literacy exhibited throughout the duration of this study, both junior high school participants and graduate student participants discussed in their interviews with me a perceived growth in visual literacy skills due to their study of sequential art narratives.

At the graduate student level, participants consistently described themselves as undergoing some sort of transformational process throughout the semester – an “immigration” (Jane), an “awakening” (Sawyer), a “homecoming” (Hien) – that resulted in each student arriving at a more complex understanding of and appreciation for visual literacy, particular in regard to the specific medium of sequential art narratives, and an increased sense of responsibility and capacity for teaching visual literacy concepts to students in English Language Arts courses moving forward.

Specifically, Jane discussed how she was “forced to rely on visual meaning-making far more than ever before” and that she learned how to slow down while reading multimedia texts and “give equal measure to words and images alike.” Sawyer described how he had come to experience “how sophisticated these texts can be [and] how hard they
are to create” and how those revelations had moved him beyond his original prejudicial stereotypes of the SAN medium. Hien remarked that he had slowly developed a better awareness of the “visual strategies the writer is trying to achieve” in SAN texts and an understanding of how he could similarly employ those same techniques to enhance his own multimodal composition (concepts like considering closure when determining what visual content to show readers versus leave to their own imaginations or considering how the perspective and framing of visual content will influence readers).

These new visual analysis techniques adapted by the graduate student participants over the progression of their learning reflect findings by McPherson (2006) that graphic novels help expand student analysis of narrative storytelling beyond just verbal elements to also include visual elements; they also mirror findings by Schwarz (2006) that reading sequential art narratives requires students to use multiple literacies simultaneously.

At the junior high school level, students were less capable of articulating the specific ways in which their visual literacy skills had grown throughout the unit, but they spoke generally about coming to better understand sequential art narratives as a unique art form thanks especially to being required to create original compositions themselves within the medium. Morgan claimed the unit “broadened
[her] horizons and gave [her] a new perspective” while David suggested that he was able to “read SAN texts more deeply now by paying attention to details [he] had never noticed before.” LaTanya perhaps best captured this sentiment when she stated, “Whatever you can do with a regular book, you can do with a graphic novel. You just show instead of tell…”

Indeed, the junior high school students’ visual literacy growth was more pronounced when examined from the perspective of their original SAN compositions, which reflected sophisticated visual composition design choices that emulated or expanded upon the innovative professional models they had viewed and discussed in class and within independent reading. Most final drafts featured complex series of paneling, intentional shifts in visual perspective, strategic usage of coloring or shading, and generally effective interplay between verbal content and visual content on the page. These effects could not be achieved in composition without an enhanced understanding of visual literacy concepts and a heightened visual thinking capacity.

It should be noted that though the general trend in the Lincoln Junior High School classroom was an increase in student engagement and achievement in regard to both verbal and visual literacy, those advancements were not experienced by all students in the study. Regan’s experience represented a “negative case” (Corbin & Strauss
2008), one that serves as a foil to the majority of other cases and appears to contradict patterns or explanations that emerged from data analysis. Regan did not experience any notable increases in verbal literacy achievement measures throughout the study and actually demonstrated a marked decrease in engagement compared to her historical behavior in the course. Her final SAN composition showed some signs of enhanced thinking in terms of visual literacy, but was still largely dominated by verbal communication. In her post-unit interview Regan was unable to articulate any specific ways she benefited from a study of graphic novels and shared that she would not likely seek out texts to read within the medium moving forward.

When asked why she thought her achievement had suffered within this particular unit, Regan answered that “Graphic novels just aren’t really my thing,” but never expounded beyond that statement, which itself seemed somewhat contradictory to other comments she made about enjoying the self-selected graphic novel, Queen Bee, that she had read independently during the unit. This could be a sign that, despite her personal experience to the contrary, Regan was largely unable to overcome stereotypical preconceptions of graphic novels as a whole and equated popular comic genres (that she personally disliked) with the medium itself, “mistaking the message for the messenger” and failing to conceive that “the medium known as comics
is a vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (McCloud 1994, p.6). It is also possible that, given Regan’s particular sensitivity to the social perceptions of her peers and a desire to remain popular among them, she felt self-conscious being asked to analyze and create sequential art narratives when doing so required a relatively unfamiliar skillset that she lacked confidence in and experience with. Perhaps if specific lessons in artistic illustration had been provided prior to SAN composition tasks, she would have engaged more readily within them.

II) *Impact on Visual/Verbal Interaction*

The study’s second sub-question investigated: “How do verbal and visual literacies interact when reading or composing texts with visual elements?”

The findings in this study suggest that verbal and visual literacies are intricately intertwined, simultaneously influencing thought in a symbiotic manner where neither modality is dominant but both are important contributors when reading or composing sequential art narratives. Both graduate students and junior high school students who participated in this study discussed specific ways in which they had to adjust their typical reading or writing behaviors in order to accommodate for the multimodal nature of sequential art texts.
When reflecting on the process he used for composing SAN texts, David remarked that when creating comics he had to alter his usual approach to writing because “you had to draw a lot of what you would normally write out in words” and therefore he began to “think of [the story] in pictures...in segments.” David’s self-discovery echoes the sentiments of the majority of graduate students who identified that an important part of learning how to effectively draft SAN texts was beginning to think of sequential art narratives in terms of distinct visual panels that could be scripted or mapped out across the page. Hien specifically mentioned that “when I became aware of the way that readers of comics fill in the gap between panels with their own imagination, that changed the way I began to think about these stories and write them myself, with that invisible process in mind.”

These reflections align with Sadoski’s and Paivio’s dual coding theory, which asserts that cognition in reading and writing consists of the activity of two separate systems for coding our experience, one specialized for verbal language (through the use of encodings known as logogens) and one specialized for visual stimuli (through the use of encodings known as imagens), that interact with one another in important ways (29). The verbal and nonverbal systems are separate and distinct but both systems are “capable of operating independently (activity in one but not the other), in parallel (separate activity in both
at the same time), or in an interconnected way through referential processing where logogens and imagens elicit each other, as well as themselves, in a fluctuating manner (36). In specific regard to multimodal composition, Sadoski and Paivio write:

In composition, there are implications for presenting content in language or in a picture (or jointly). When presented as language, the composer can leave a great deal to the reader/listener’s imagination...however, if presented as a pictorial image, more specificity is necessitated (113).

Both David’s and Hien’s examples from above illustrate how students in this study increasingly became more aware of the various ways in which effective sequential art storytelling demanded attention be paid to both visual and verbal coding systems individually as well as to the interaction between systems.

Similar alterations were made by participants as they learned to read sequential art narratives with increasing proficiency throughout the study. Many students observed that they consciously began to slow their reading rates when reading SANs (in comparison to purely verbal texts) in order to become more cognizant of the visual elements within each panel and the interplay they had with their corresponding
verbal elements. Jane described this phenomenon in the following manner:

During the read alouds, one of the important things I quickly realized was that I was reading panels on my own entirely too quickly. I would simply read the words and move on, sometimes skipping wordless panels altogether. But in watching you discuss how a variety of visual details in the panels were enriching your understanding of the text - details I completely overlooked myself - I learned how important it is to slow down while reading a SAN text and give equal measure to words and images alike.

The beneficial impact of a decreased reading rate was especially noticeable in controlled settings where the instructor asked partners or small groups to stop and discuss their reading at fixed intervals of time. Though many students expressed dissatisfaction for this approach to reading SANs (compared to independent reading), the observations they made in such settings were markedly more complex, especially in regard to the manner in which they mixed modalities and focused on ways that visual and verbal elements of a particular panel worked in synchronization to influence meaning-making rather than as distinct systems unto themselves. This commentary aligns with Gardner’s multiple intelligences research that
suggest neither verbal perception nor visual perception precedes one another in influencing thought but rather work in symbiosis (63-74).

Participants in the study also noted that it became much easier to perceive and understand the interactions between visual and verbal elements while reading a sequential art text as a result of being required to compose SAN texts themselves. Ned observed,

> Once you get your own ideas about how to make graphic novels, it sort of helps when you read them, too, because then you’re like ‘oh, so he’s doing this like I did’ or ‘hmm...he decided to go a totally different direction, but wow, it’s better like that here.’ [Creating comics] broadens your thinking about how communication works.

Many other students made similar comments to this effect, that they did not fully understand the interplay that is at work in a sequential art narrative until they were forced to consider, as an author, how to put those elements together on a page in a way that makes sense to a reader or that achieves maximal narrative impact. This revelation is supported by the body of research that finds that creative composition opportunities within a particular medium lead to students achieving a more thorough understanding of the intricacies of that medium (Thoman & Jolls 1994; Fletcher & Portalupi 1998; Ray 1999; Hicks 2013).
Finally, the interaction between visual and verbal literacies within the reading process also seemed to increase students’ overall comprehension of the texts they read. Many of the junior high school students mentioned in their post-unit interviews that they found graphic novels to be especially accessible due to their multimodal content. LaTanya commented, “The pictures made it easier to figure stuff out. I felt like I really knew what was going on in the stories, and that’s not usually the case with the other stuff we read in this class.” This finding is consistent with Dual Coding Theory’s assertion that “complementary material processed by both the verbal and nonverbal codes has a general advantage [in terms of its capacity for comprehension] over material processed in the verbal code alone” (Sadoski & Paivio 2013, p. 104) as well as the body of existing research that suggests that low-level readers have increased comprehension when reading sequential art narratives due to the visual context provided by these texts (Sones 1944; Gorman 2003; Lyga & Lyga 2004; Cary 2004; Liu 2004; Annett 2008).

III) Impact of SAN Vocabulary/Concept Instruction

The study’s third sub-question investigated: “How does explicit instruction in the vocabulary and concepts associated with the medium
of sequential art narratives affect student comprehension and composition within the medium?"

The findings in this study revealed mixed results in regard to this particular research question. Most of the graduate student participants as well as the highest-achieving junior high school student participants found direct instruction in sequential art narrative vocabulary and concepts to be particularly helpful; these students began using that vocabulary themselves when discussing SAN texts and utilized many of the sophisticated visual literacy concepts that were studied within their own SAN composition projects. On the other hand, the majority of the junior high school students within the study did not seem to explicitly benefit from this instruction, as it did not have any observable impact upon their oral or written language about sequential art narratives nor did the visual literacy concepts manifest themselves as prevalently within their SAN compositions.

The difference in outcomes between participants seemed to be correlated with the degree to which each student was capable of engaging in independent critical analysis or evaluation of SAN texts; those students who demonstrated a capacity for higher-order thinking leveraged their newly-learned visual literacy vocabulary to enhance the precision and depth of their commentary, while those students who primarily interacted with texts at a basic comprehension level
spoke mainly about the plotlines of their respective stories and not the way they were visually crafted, thereby rendering the need for technical sequential art literacy terminology largely unnecessary. Furthermore, those students who were able to think critically about craft decisions within the SAN texts they read were able to apply those visual literacy concepts to their own SAN writing processes, whereas those students who were unable to extend their reading beyond a basic comprehension level tended to employ simplistic illustration techniques when composing their original sequential art narratives.

These variances in learning outcomes occurred despite the overt intention on the part of the graduate students to explicitly incorporate visual literacy instruction into the design of the graphic novel unit at Lincoln Junior High School with the express purpose of elevating the visual analysis skills of all students. The graduate students had found similar approaches (i.e. reading and discussing McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, watching their professor and colleagues “think aloud” as they analyzed sample pages from various graphic novels) particularly beneficial in their own course of study. Sawyer remarked, “[The McCloud text] taught me to think differently about comics, but perhaps more importantly, it also taught me to talk differently about them, too.” He later continued, “It’s impossible to talk critically about a text, to fully appreciate it, if you don’t have a language by which to
adequately and efficiently describe the choices that the composer is making.” Jane echoed similar sentiments in one of her interviews: “When I finally had words to describe things like closure, perspective, or framing, I could give a name to what I was experiencing while I was reading, which in turn led me to think more analytically instead of just merely comprehending what was going on.” These comments validate the Center for Media Literacy’s assertion that “media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules” (Thoman & Jolls, 2004, p.7) and Shlain’s avowal that “information comes in multiple forms, and ... each form of communication has its own rules and grammar” (2005).

Given the impact described in the aforementioned testimonies, the graduate students anticipated that the Lincoln Junior High School students would respond in a similar fashion to this type of instruction and accordingly made it a priority when planning the instructional unit they would jointly teach them. The graduate students ultimately decided not to invest time in having the junior high school students read McCloud, but Jane created a two-day presentation that led students through an interactive investigation of the major SAN concepts that McCloud discusses (like closure, paneling, encapsulation, etc.), as applied within samples pages from a dozen or more professional graphic novels. Following the presentation, students were
asked to transmediate a poem into a sequential art format using a step-by-step, concept-by-concept approach to writing. In her post-teaching interview, Jane reflected:

The SAN vocabulary lessons I taught in the middle of the unit seemed to be pretty hit-or-miss. Everyone seemed to be paying attention, but some students really got into the analysis of the examples - and those were the same students who started using the vocabulary in their discussions and their journal writing throughout the rest of the unit and who created some amazing final products. But it didn’t seem to stick for the rest of the students. I think they understood the ideas, because they started trying to mimic some of the visual design choices in the SAN poems they made, but they never really started using the language of comics and they didn’t seem to be able to apply those concepts to the independent reading they were doing. I’m not sure if they just needed more time and more practice, or if the concepts were just too abstract for this age group.

My own observations of students’ in-class collaboration with their instructors or peers and their journal entries in response to
independent reading were in accordance with the analysis suggested by Jane above.

For their part, the Lincoln Junior High students shared similar sentiments. In their post-unit interviews, most JHS students suggested that the SAN vocabulary instruction they received was generally helpful to them, but they struggled to articulate explicit ways in which it abetted them or even to name specific terms or concepts that were most impactful. Only four participants – David, Morgan, Peter (a non-case study example whose experience was similar to David), and Ned – began using SAN terms regularly with confidence and clarity throughout the unit and within their post-unit interview. All four responses were similar to this commentary provided by Ned:

It was really helpful to learn the official words for the different things that comic writers do and to see examples from books that are famous in the graphic novel world. We could see the different things the authors did and talk about those choices, and that gave me lots of new ideas for my own writing. I’ve never really been able to describe why I was doing the things I was doing when drawing manga before, but now that I know what those things are called, it’s a lot easier to talk about.
For these students, the implemented visual literacy instruction had the desired outcome, a notable impact upon helping them “to study the way writers use craft and conventions in communicating meaning to their readers” so as to better “think about the writer’s purpose and audience and notice the features that help the writer achieve an effective communication” (Fountas and Pinnell 2012, p.7).

More study is needed as to why this outcome was not achieved for all learners. A possible rationale for why other junior high school students did not use SAN vocabulary in their written or oral communication is that their critical analysis skills may not yet have been refined enough to warrant a need for such language; if their focus was simply on comprehending the plot storylines of a given text, academic language concerning craft techniques was largely irrelevant to that conversation. Additionally, the ability to literally see craft elements displayed visually in the text may have minimized the need for language to elaborately describe what was already plainly visible. Future research should examine these discrepancies in more detail.

IV) Impact of Manner of Reading SANs

The study’s fourth sub-question investigated: “What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from reading sequential art narratives in the following manners:
Independently?

Collectively with a partner?

Collectively in a small group?

Collectively as a full class guided by the instructor?"

All participants in the study found independent reading of sequential art narratives to be an essential part of their learning experience. Both graduate and junior high school students discussed the importance of having the opportunity to self-select particular graphic novels based on personal interests. For example, David shared that “I was open to all the books we read in class, but I was less interested in the ones you forced us to read” while LaTanya remarked that “I liked reading on my own, cause if you’re reading something you don’t want to read, then you’re not that interested in it and don’t pay attention to it” and Morgan noted that “Free choice was very important. There are so many different styles of graphic novels. If you are forced into one that you don’t like, kids probably aren’t going to give it a second chance.” These student viewpoints are consistent with the findings of broader research investigating the gradual release of instructional responsibility framework where student engagement and achievement in reading increases when students are able to read differentiated texts that they have a choice in selecting

The graduate student participants concluded that it was the inclusion of additional supports related to independent reading that made the act of reading in this manner so impactful. These included having substantial amounts of in-class time provided for independent browsing/reading of various graphic novels; having access to a large in-class library of graphic novels with the ability to check-out books for at-home reading; and the frequent use of book talks or personal recommendations of quality, engaging graphic novels made by the instructors. Without these supports in place, many participants felt their independent reading would have been less voluminous, less varied, and less aligned to their personal interests, ultimately resulting in a less fulfilling literacy experience. That is to say that if a large classroom library of diverse graphic novels, books that had been chosen by a teacher with lots of knowledge of the medium and by students who had self-selected titles due to a generous Lincoln Junior High School parent teacher organization classroom resources grant, had not been available throughout this study, it is uncertain how effective independent reading would have been (or whether it would have even been an attainable option), since study participants largely
conflated independent reading with the personalized choice of text that such an approach afforded.

Though all participants in the study expressed that independent reading was their preferred method for reading sequential art narratives, this opinion was expressed most strongly among the Lincoln Junior High School students, who cited a variety of reasons for this inclination. David, Morgan, and Ned all expressed frustration with inconsistent reading pacing that occurred during collective reading experiences; David felt pressured to rush through his reading and skip panels to keep up with his partners, whereas Morgan and Ned were annoyed by the slower reading pace of others and often blazed ahead of where their respective groups were in a particular text. Regan found it harder to engage in collective reading tasks: “It was fun reading with a partner, but I think I was more focused when I read by myself. I tend to get off track when I’m around other people.”

Morgan admitted to feeling self-conscious during small group collective reading tasks, which impaired her willingness to contribute in these settings (and though Max did not participate in an interview with me, he exhibited behaviors during collective reading tasks that suggested similar sentiments); though these students complied with teacher directions to join collective reading groups, they never fully personally
engaged in them, thereby minimizing the potential impact that was gained from these structures.

Of the various collective reading approaches utilized, students found partner reading to be the most successful, largely because the aforementioned drawbacks were less prevalent when students only had to adjust their reading rate, focus their attention, and share their insights with one other peer. Student frustrations and off-task behavior increased within small group or full class collective reading structures, where the active participation of a handful of dutiful students like David largely overshadowed the overall disengagement of students like Regan, who feigned participation but was neither reading nor discussing the text at all, or the benignly rebellious behavior of students like Morgan, who chose to read ahead independently in the text and forgo group discussions altogether.

Despite their reservations with collective reading, the students at Lincoln Junior High School did acknowledge some important benefits that occurred when these structures were used. David recognized that the conversation that occurred between students during the act of collaborative reading exercises was beneficial because it allowed him to hear differing perspectives that prompted him to think differently about the storyline or to notice visual details that he overlooked on his own. Ned mentioned that collaborative reading prompted him to look
more closely at the text than he would have naturally done by himself, often re-reading a page or panel several times, to reflect more deeply about the craft elements that were at work. LaTanya shared:

I like to talk to other people when I read cause it helps me get into the story more and figure stuff out that doesn’t make sense on its own. But like with [graphic novels] it was extra helpful cause your partner would point out stuff in the pictures that you, like, totally hadn’t seen before and that could change your mind about what was really happening in the story.

Even though the formal VTS (visual thinking strategy) structure of recursive questioning was not employed in these collaborative reading settings, the learning outcomes described by the students above align with the findings by Yenawine (1998) and Housen (2002) that repeated collaborative discussion of visual design choices leads to aesthetic growth among participants, as measured by the number and complexity of observations made, the grounding of interpretations to what is actually depicted in the image, and an increased awareness or concern for the artist’s intentions and craft decisions.

The students’ revelations about collective reading outcomes also indicate that a tension exists between the previously stated desire to read independently (where the act of reading appeared to be more
efficient and enjoyable for participants) and the articulated benefits that occur from reading collaboratively (where the act of reading appeared to be more effective for participants, in terms of the quality of comprehension and analysis that emerged). A large body of research suggests that instructor/peer collaboration is indeed necessary before students can successfully engage in independent work on their own, because professional collaboration mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise (Duke & Pearson 2002; Fisher & Frey 2007; Lloyd 2004; Kong & Pearson 2003; Beuhl 2005).

Accordingly, several students recommended the following advice to future teachers of sequential art narratives: continue to incorporate collectively-read graphic novels in the classroom (alongside opportunities for independent reading of student-selected texts), but rather than try to facilitate simultaneous reading of a SAN text by partners, small groups, or as a full class, give individual students time to read the selected texts on their own first and then meet in collaborative groups, not just to discuss their general experiences, but to specifically analyze select pages or panels from the reading. Such a structure would move away from routine analysis of every page in the text in favor of expanded analysis of particularly innovative or
important pages, thereby offsetting the increase in instructional time that would otherwise be needed to implement this approach, while also largely neutralizing the negative aspects of collective reading (varied reading paces, difficulty in focusing, self-conscious while reading) without sacrificing the valuable learning that comes to fruition through such collaboration.

V) Impact of Process for Composing SANs

The study’s fifth and final sub-question investigated: “What benefits and drawbacks do students identify from engaging in the following writing processes:

- Adapting existing prose / poetry / scripts into a sequential art format?
- Developing an original narrative directly into a sequential art format?
- Utilizing sequential art design software as a proxy for hand-drawn illustration?”

The findings in this study suggest that providing opportunities for students to practice creative composition within the sequential art medium is especially impactful for helping students to better understand how to analyze and evaluate the medium itself. David suggested that learning to write comics “…allowed me to appreciate them more. Instead of it just being a bunch of pictures strewn
together with words, instead now you get to see ‘oh this is hard, this is tough,’ ... you get a new respect for it.” Ned shared, “If we had just written about comics instead of drawing them, I wouldn’t have gotten as much out of it, because it’s all about working with your hands and understanding how you can make things work and how you can get others to understand it.” Morgan asserted:

> It was really important to create comics as well as read them so that you could get a better understanding of what goes into [the medium]. Kind of like poetry, once you know what goes into it and how to make it yourself, you have a better appreciation and understanding for it. You get to see the other side of the looking glass...

Similar sentiments were shared by all of the graduate student participants and many of the other Lincoln Junior High School students. These perspectives align to existing research that finds that by positioning students as fellow writers within a particular medium, they are given a new purpose for reading that opens up new ways of understanding the text that turns their attention to how and why an author made particular decisions in crafting his/her message (Thoman & Jolls 1994; Fletcher and Portalupi 1998; Wood Ray 1999; Hicks 2013).
Both graduate students and junior high school students engaged in several informal (graded only on completion), in-class sequential art narrative composition tasks throughout their respective instructional units and one formal culminating assessment (graded for quality) that required them to create an original, short SAN composition.

In both cases, students found it helpful to begin experimenting with sequential art design through the application of writing tasks that asked them to adapt an existing verbal text (a short piece of prose, a poem, an excerpt from a script, an oral account being narrated by a partner, etc.) into a sequential art format. Doing so allowed them to focus the bulk of their cognitive attention on visual literacy principles and other elements unique to the sequential art medium without having to simultaneously worry about writing components associated with the narrative itself (i.e. plot, dialogue, setting, character development, etc.). These transmediation exercises, tasks that required students to “take understandings from one [semiotic] system and move them into another sign system” (Siegel, 1995) subtly taught students to consider the unique characteristics of the SAN medium as they adapted their source material into that new form of text, providing opportunities for low-risk experimentation that participants later reflected was a critical foundation for developing confidence, interest, and aptitude for writing sequential art narratives. These
outcomes are supported by decades of research that finds that transmediation exercises are shown to improve students’ ability to read, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of textual environments and multiple sign systems (Suhor 1984; Seigel 1995; Semali & Fueyo 2001).

As students eventually transitioned into creating their formal SAN composition assignment, there was no prevailing pattern of preference among Lincoln Junior High School participants between creating an original, new narrative within the sequential art medium or continuing in the spirit of the previous transmediation exercises and adapting another existing text into a sequential art format; different students made different decisions based on their own personal inclinations. The decision they made, however, had a somewhat profound impact on the writing approach they then took.

Students like Ned and Regan, who created a new, original narrative within the sequential art medium, tended to move directly and quickly into crafting their final product, slowly writing and illustrating one panel at a time as their story chronologically unfolded before them. Though all these students seemed to engage in a little bit of prewriting brainstorming work, many made similar comments in their post-unit interviews with me to this confession by Ned: “I had a general sense of the story I wanted to tell, but I pretty much made up
the details as I went along, and drew each picture to match the moment I was working on.” Many students who created original SAN compositions were also resistant to the idea of revising their work once they had moved on from a particular panel. In the end, there was a considerable range of quality among the students’ original SAN submissions, with some making very sophisticated visual design choices (Ned’s) and others remaining very simplistic (Regan’s).

In contrast to the writing process used by the aforementioned junior high students, participants like Jacob and Morgan, who adapted an existing text, both created full-page dummy sketches of their projects before beginning to illustrate their final drafts. In their post-unit interviews with me, they shared commentary that revealed they had meticulously considered how the individual panels they crafted would come together on the page to create a cohesive whole. Morgan shared, “The hardest part for me was finding the right text to adapt and then figuring out the best way to split up the words of the poem. After that, it really just kind of drew itself, and it was a lot of fun to put it together.” Jacob offered similar recollections – he originally struggled with trimming his source material to a manageable amount of content for the project, but once it was suitably scripted and laid out on the page, he found the act of illustrating the comic to be fairly straightforward.
Lincoln Junior High School students who submitted adapted text SAN compositions scored higher on average on the writing assignment than students who created original SAN compositions. This difference in student achievement can most likely be attributed to unintentional bias in the assignment design, stemming from the fact that the professional texts that many students were adapting were inherently better organized and developed (verbally) than the original narratives composed by their adolescent peers. However, students who adapted texts also scored higher on the visual literacy aspects of the rubric than their peers who composed original texts, due perhaps to the fact that these students were able to focus their attention solely on visual design principles, could consider the completed text in its entirety before drafting, and were more inclined to engage in revision.

The graduate student participants, for their part, were required to craft an original sequential art narrative for their final assignment and did not pursue adaptation of an existing text as an option. Their work was considerably (and expectedly) stronger than their junior high counterparts, though also quite a bit longer, as they struggled to craft a complete, fully-realized narrative in fewer than twenty panels. They found the following aspects of writing within the sequential art medium additionally challenging, though ultimately were able to develop strategies to accommodate for them: determining a writing topic that
was well-suited for visual-verbal storytelling; learning to think of narratives in terms of distinct visual panels and to script or map them out on a page; embracing the role of revision in illustration as well as verbal writing; and overcoming a self-conscious fear of drawing and/or developing coping mechanisms for subpar illustration skills.

This latter challenge – the frustration associated with an inability to sufficiently execute within illustration a visual conception possessed within the storyteller’s mind – was a source of contention for virtually all students (at both levels). Many participants were initially reluctant to draw their ideas at all, though after encouragement and low-risk practice opportunities, these same individuals often expressed surprise that their drawing abilities turned out to be markedly better than they had initially perceived they would be. Nevertheless, after reading and studying a variety of beautifully-illustrated professional graphic novels, few participants’ personal drawing skills matched the ideal level of professionalism these students would have liked to achieve in their original SAN composition tasks.

Accordingly, the graduate student field teachers availed their Lincoln Junior High School students of the option of using digital software as a proxy illustration option. Students spent multiple class periods being introduced to and experimenting with one such program, ToonDoo, as a digital comic creation platform. Though all students in
the class seemed to thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to craft texts in this fashion, when it came time to choose a method of illustration for their original sequential art narrative composition project, the vast majority of students opted to draw their texts by hand. When asked about this decision in their post-unit interviews, many students expressed opinions similar to this comment made by David: “The software didn’t have enough variety to be able to write the story I wanted to write.” Though these students remained frustrated with their own lackluster drawing abilities, they were also frustrated by the limitations that digital software put upon them, and ultimately concluded that it was better to have freedom of expression than technical precision in relaying that expression. This philosophy adheres to Eisner’s principle that, “Technology has always had the effect of expanding an artist’s reach while challenging their individuality” (172).

There were a handful of students, however, who enthusiastically preferred digital composition as an illustration method. Though LaTanya ultimately created a hand-drawn SAN composition due to logistical barriers (she did not have access to a computer within in-school suspension), she expressed a definite preference in her post-unit interview for using computer software to illustrate SAN texts. She cited efficiency, spontaneity (being able to easily try out different
approaches), and increased inspiration (having pre-existing images to spur brainstorming) as significant benefits to the digital method. She explained:

Drawing my own comics was kind of easy, but I just couldn’t get it on the paper, exactly what I meant. With the computer, I could pick out the pictures, all the ideas and designs you could make. You could express what you were thinking way better with the stuff they had, because if you can’t draw, then you get stuck. I couldn’t always find exactly what I wanted on the computer, but I found enough to make it work. But on paper, I would get stuck and couldn’t really fix it.

LaTanya was a student who struggled with the composition of purely verbal texts, too, so her aforementioned commentary provides some interesting insight into the potential benefits that digital illustration software may be able to offer students for whom the writing process is particularly difficult.

In another example, Max showed a reluctance to engage in the formal and informal writing tasks (of both verbal texts and sequential art narrative texts) being asked of him within the classroom until digital composition was advanced as a legitimate option, at which point he immediately became an active participant in the learning. He went
on to produce a sophisticated, original digital composition that adapted the opening prologue of one of his favorite video games into a sequential art format; he almost certainly would not have produced the same text by hand and most likely would have chosen to forgo the assignment altogether. Therefore, in the same way that digital composition may be able to aid struggling SAN writers like LaTanya, it may also be able to motivate reluctant SAN writers like Max.

Finally, the graduate student participants concluded that the inclusion of various instructional design choices also positively impacted the student writing growth that occurred over the course of the unit. These included the opportunity for students to select their own writing topics, substantial amounts of in-class time provided for drafting writing, frequent opportunities for mid-draft peer and instructor feedback, the continuation of SAN reading assignments concurrent with the writing project to prompt new thinking about style and structure, and a publication celebration at the end of the project. Without these supports in place, many participants felt the SAN composition task would have been less impactful.
CHAPTER SIX:
CONCLUSIONS

An Emerging Theory of Teaching Sequential Art Narratives
Limitations of the Study
The Future of Sequential Art Narrative Instruction

This research study investigated how various instructional
techniques impact the manner in which students learn to effectively
read and compose sequential art narratives. The study tracked the
experiences of six graduate students learning to read, write, and teach
graphic novels over the course of a semester-length seminar, as well
as the experiences of twelve junior high school students who
participated in a four-week, introductory instructional unit to graphic
novels taught by three of the graduate students within a field
experience setting. This chapter will draw conclusions from the cases
studied in Chapter 4 and the answers they provided to the study’s
research questions in Chapter 5 to ultimately develop a theory
concerning effective sequential art narrative instruction for students.
The chapter will end with a reflection on the contributions and
limitations of this study in respect to the body of existing professional
literature about sequential art narrative instruction and will make
suggestions for future research.
An Emerging Theory of Teaching Sequential Art Narratives

This study’s findings are grounded in the diverse experiences of the graduate student participants at State University and the junior high school student participants at Lincoln Junior High School (whose cases are described in detail in Chapter 4). A collective analysis of all cases provided answers to this research study’s sub-questions (discussed in detail in Chapter 5), and the conclusions drawn from those sub-questions provide the foundation upon which to answer this project’s central research question:

How do the pedagogical decisions made during a study of sequential art narratives affect students’ abilities to critically engage when reading and composing within the medium?

What theory emerges as a model of effective practice concerning sequential art narrative instruction for students?

Figure 19 depicts a visual model of this researcher’s emerging theory concerning sequential art narrative instruction as grounded in the experiences of participants within this research study. It seeks to illustrate a set of core concepts for the design of effective sequential art narrative instruction and a framework by which to enact them within the classroom.
The theory asserts that sequential art narrative instruction should be equitably and recursively situated between the two inverse literacy functions of reading (decoding a message within the medium) and writing (encoding a message within the medium) throughout the entirety of the instructional unit, which itself should feature a gradual release of instructional responsibility that transitions from predominately teacher-led learning experiences, to peer-led learning experiences, and ultimately to individual-led learning experiences as
students become more familiar and more capable with the unique attributes of the medium. The theory features a central guiding concept to provide instructional focus to each phase of gradual release ("visual literacy modeling" during teacher-led instruction, "collaboration" during peer-led instruction, and "creative composition" during individual-led instruction), as well as a central guiding concept for an overarching approach to reading instruction ("mentor texts") and an overarching approach to writing instruction ("transmediation"), both of which are featured throughout all three phases of gradual release, with gradient shading suggesting they should be seamlessly blended into the instruction that occurs there.

The six guiding concepts featured in the theory were derived from the recurring thematic elements found in my research that were identified by participants and observed in action as significant teaching techniques within the medium of sequential art narratives. Each guiding concept shall be concisely summarized below in regard to how it applies to the overall theory of teaching sequential art narratives. An in-depth description of these findings and their foundations in existing research can be found in Chapter 5 within the context of the research questions associated with my study.

*Gradual Release of Responsibility* – The gradual release of instructional responsibility is the overarching conceptual framework for
the theory as a whole. Varying levels of support are needed by students at different intervals throughout their learning process in order to help them achieve independence in reading and writing sequential art texts. Many students a teacher encounters are unlikely to have had much, if any, prior academic study of sequential art narratives and accordingly need considerable amounts of modeling by an experienced SAN reader (the instructor) as well as the establishment of background knowledge within the medium applied at the onset of instruction. Eventually, each student will grow in confidence and competence and be able to engage in collaborative reading and writings tasks where they will work with peers to continue to hone one another’s newly developed skills and broaden the base of diverse perspectives with which they interact, further adapting their own reading and writing processes. Ultimately, students should achieve proficiency in the ability to independently read and compose sequential art narratives, but only after having extensive opportunities to practice in individualized settings.

Visual Literacy Modeling – The modeling of visual literacy, the “inner voice” questions or connections made by an individual when interpreting visual media such as the illustrations within sequential art narratives, comprises the primary basis of teacher-led instruction within the proposed theory. Students need to observe successful
reading habits unique to understanding comics (i.e., slowing one’s typical reading rate, paying attention to visual details, navigating the sequence of panels or text balloons, etc.) as well as become familiar with visual literacy concepts unique to the sequential art medium (i.e., closure, encapsulation, visual abstraction, etc.), though it is less important that students be expected to learn the technical terminology associated with these ideas than for them to see visual-verbal models of these concepts in action. Instructors should train students to begin to analyze the complex craft decisions that authors and illustrators make in sequential art texts and the impact those decisions have on readers. Ultimately, this should lead instructors to also model the act of composing sequential art narratives and the thinking that is associated with the various writing strategies they employ within this medium.

**Collaboration** – Collaboration is the centerpiece of peer-led learning within the theory of effective sequential art narrative instruction posited above. Once SAN foundational knowledge has been established through teacher-led modeling, students need time to informally rehearse their own visual thinking processes with peers as they continue to refine these new skills; doing so will simultaneously allow them to observe increasingly varied approaches to analyzing and/or composing texts within the medium (rather than perpetually
relying solely on the instructor’s personal methodology). Collective reading approaches featuring partners or small groups can be useful for fostering productive dialogue but should be limited to particular pages or panels rather than long expanses of text, lest the frustration of trying to read in synchronization with multiple individuals offset the gains generated from collaborative discourse. Collective writing approaches where students work as a team to make visual design decisions in creating simple, low-stake sequential art texts can help students overcome initial reluctances to writing within the medium that may result from feelings of self-consciousness related to one’s illustration abilities.

*Creative Composition* – The hallmark of individual-led learning within the proposed theory of teaching sequential art narratives is the opportunity for students to engage in effective creative composition within the medium, where they produce and publish original sequential art texts. Assuming the role of creator of SAN texts (and the various design choices that accompany it) transforms the manner in which students furthermore read or write such texts and increases their overall appreciation for the medium. Taking personal ownership over the process of composing a sequential art narrative allows students the occasion to apply the visual literacy strategies they have learned from their teacher and peers in a meaningful endeavor that both
requires and expands first-hand knowledge of craft, which in turn
strengthens a student’s motivation and capacity for future reading and
writing within the medium.

Mentor Texts – As students read a variety of graphic novels and
other short sequential art texts throughout their unit of study, the
posited theory of effective SAN instruction suggests that the teacher
should foster a philosophy of “reading like a writer” and treat each
source as a “mentor text” that will provide invaluable information to
students in regard to various design approaches related to the
sequential art medium used by professional authors in the field or
even by the instructor or fellow novice writers. The teacher can
strategically expose students to excerpts from a wide variety of
graphic novels during teacher-led visual literacy strategy mini-lessons,
then gradually release responsibility of text selection to students, first
by offering a variety of collective reading options to partners or small
groups for collaborative discussions and ultimately to individual
students during independent reading. The growing body of mentor
texts that each student reads will provide inspiration and tutelage for
their own individual-led creative composition project.

Transmediation – The aforementioned theory of teaching
sequential art narratives suggests that writing activities within the
medium should be incorporated throughout the learning process and
not just as a formal creative composition project at the end of the instructional unit. In doing so, students should continually be asked to transmediate various existing texts from other media into a sequential art format. Doing so helps students to better understand the nuances, opportunities, and limitations of the SAN medium in comparison with other methods of communication. Teachers can use professionally-adapted graphic novel exemplars and/or their own transmediation attempts during teacher-led modeling at the onset of the unit and then gradually expose students to increasingly complex peer and individual transmediation exercises as their learning progresses.

These six key concepts – gradual release of responsibility, visual literacy modeling, collaboration, creative composition, mentor texts, and transmediation – have independent functions but work cohesively within the proposed theoretical framework to provide a powerful learning experience for students that can beneficially transform the way they read, write, and think about sequential art narratives.

Limitations of the Study

Though the implications of the aforementioned theory of teaching sequential art narratives established by this study are potentially exciting, it should be noted that this singular study had a
number of limitations that may have inadvertently biased the theory that emerged in various ways.

Limitations of the study’s research design (discussed in-depth in Chapter 3) included my own considerable familiarity with the various graduate student and junior high school participants prior to the study, as well as my status as an official teacher of record for the Reading Enrichment students at Lincoln Junior High School and my role as an unofficial instructor in State University’s “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” graduate course. My relationship with my subjects may have unduly influenced the way they participated in the study, though I took a number of conscious efforts to mitigate any such effects by abdicating all grading responsibilities within the unit of instruction and by member-checking my findings.

The nature of the study’s subjects also poses a potential limitation to the study’s findings. The instructional courses in both research settings were somewhat elective in nature, small in class size, and held within a progressive community that supports new media instruction. Further study is needed to see if the theory of effective pedagogy for sequential art narrative instruction proposed by this dissertation applies equally to students within different educational settings, including ones that feature compulsory education, larger
class sizes, and/or less community support for sequential art narratives.

Similarly, though the subjects within the Lincoln Junior High School research setting were fairly diverse racially, socioeconomically, and academically, and a number of different student archetypes were observed there (‘gifted’ learners, ‘average’ learners, ‘reluctant’ learners, and ‘at risk’ learners), there also were a number of common student archetypes that were not observed within this particular study, including but not limited to: students with disabilities or individualized education programs; students who are English language learners; students who express oppositional behaviors. Future study is needed to see how the theory of sequential art narrative instruction proposed by this research study applies to these types of students.

**The Future of Sequential Art Narrative Instruction**

I began this dissertation with a personal anecdote from my first week of teaching (in 2006) when I posed the following question to a veteran colleague and was met with skepticism and misgiving: “What graphic novels do we have in our Language Arts resource center?”

I believe that scenario would play out very differently today. Having stayed in touch with that colleague over the past decade, I can personally attest that her feelings about graphic novels have changed
profoundly in that time frame. She now encourages many of her students to consider graphic novels as part of their independent reading diet and she leads students in a full-class study of one particular graphic novel (John Lewis’s *March*) as a core text in her high school classroom each year. Her transformation has been inspired by a number of factors, including new state standards and standardized assessments that value visual literacy skills, a new Media Specialist who has actively promoted graphic novels in their school library, and a growing body of practitioner articles attesting to the value of sequential art narratives in the classroom.

Though my colleague’s response would be different today, I also think my own initial question would be different, too. As previously noted, access to graphic novels and establishing a rationale to use them is no longer the pressing concern on teachers’ minds. Today, the question that lingers is: “How do I teach a text like this?”

This research study sought to develop a theory of effective pedagogy for teaching sequential art narratives to answer that very question. The findings published within this dissertation, grounded within the experiences of the graduate students and junior high school students who participated within the study, are an exciting first step towards establishing a set of *comic* core standards by which to plan and deliver sequential art narrative instruction – so that students are
better equipped to navigate the medium and other visual texts they encounter within and outside of school.

However, more research is needed in a wide variety of educational settings and with a wide variety of students across the world in order to fully test the efficacy and adaptability of the theory proposed by this initial study. Specific areas of suggested continued study include:

- The application of the proposed theory of teaching sequential art narratives in classrooms with different student demographics and environmental contexts than the ones observed in this study
- Exploration of variances in the proposed theory when sequential art narratives are used outside of an instructional unit devoted exclusively to introducing students to that particular medium
- An examination of the impact that sequential art narratives have on developing student visual and verbal literacy skills in direct comparison to other multimodal media
- Further research into the causes of discrepancies in achievement among students in response to direct instruction related to visual literacy concepts and associated vocabulary with attention to possible remedies
- Continued study of the benefits and drawbacks that emerge from independent versus collaborative reading of a wide variety of sequential art narratives
- An in-depth investigation of the strengths and limitations of various sequential art design software in comparison to having students create sequential art texts by hand
- Research into the utility of the proposed theory of instruction for sequential art narratives in its application with different types of visual media

Ultimately, it is impossible to consider the future of sequential art narrative instruction without bearing in mind its troubled past. Sixty years ago, when Frederic Werthem published *Seduction of the Innocent* and used his testimony in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to frighten publishers into developing the overreaching Comics Code Authority, many sequential art enthusiasts of the era had every reason to abandon hope that their preferred medium would survive such reactionary intervention. As my country faces many more vastly troubling circumstances today, it gives me small comfort to know that, at least in this instance, Theodore Parker’s timeless quote has held true: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”
The sequential art medium has been vindicated and is now poised to be a powerful tool for helping educators help their students to unlock the multimodal world in which they live. When sequential art narratives are taught in conjunction with visual literacy modeling, quality mentor texts, and frequent opportunities for student collaboration, creative composition, and transmediation experimentation within a gradual release of (instructor) responsibility framework, students’ motivation and aptitude for reading and composing within the medium will flourish, and in the process, students will hone the multifaceted skills they need to be successful in 21st century civic, academic, and professional life. If we are lucky, in an act of sweet poetic justice, we may even inspire some real-life super-heroes to further Parker’s vision in our own world...

Excelsior!
APPENDIX A
GRADUATE COURSE SYLLABUS

Reading, Writing, & Teaching Graphic Novels

LTC 8640, Studies in English Education
Spring, 2011

INSTRUCTORS:

Dr. Roy F. Fox
Office Phone: 573-884-0899
211-C Townsend Hall
Office Hours: Tuesdays, 10-1 & by appointment
E-mail: foxr@missouri.edu

Mr. Nick Kremer
Instructor, Oakland JHS
MU Graduate Teaching/Research Assistant
Participant/Observer of Class
E-Mail: ntkmrb@mail.mizzou.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course explores the theory, research, and practice of visual/verbal texts, especially the graphic novel. This course is intended for graduate students in any academic discipline or field, who wish to learn more about visual processes and products within their own discipline, as well as within their larger communities and cultures. The class is divided into the following four major components: 1) introduction of visual/verbal literacy—its principles, processes, and basic theories that apply across media; 2) reading and interpreting graphic novels; 3) composing graphic novel mini-narratives; and 4) the pedagogy of graphic novels, including analysis of teaching a graphic text.

REQUIRED TEXTS:


4. Articles on reserve in ERES. (See weekly assigned readings.)

**COURSE ASSUMPTIONS/RATIONALE:**

1. The term, “text,” refers to any message communicated in any medium or symbol system (though in this course, we will focus on visual and visual/verbal communication).

2. Images can occur within non-visual systems, such as language and music.

3. Image processes and products operate in all disciplines, professions, careers, and vocations.

4. Visual literacy will continue to dominate future thinking and communication. Becoming increasingly visually literate will serve as a unifying principle and coherent means of interacting with all new technologies and attendant literacies.

5. Tomorrow’s successful professionals must be prepared in the “New Literacies,” which, because of the speed at which they can appear, necessarily means that you should become adept at “approaching” new technologies and your attendant literacies.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

**READING:** You will use specific analytical systems, such as 1) narrative patterns, 2) Rank’s Intensify/Downplay Schema, 3) Semiotics, and 4) propaganda techniques to compare the ways different media and texts present information about a topic, as you learn about the visual and verbal techniques used for effective graphic novels, including those graphic novels in online and interactive formats, which extend the genre’s capabilities. We will read two graphic novels collectively as a class, but extensive time will also be provided for individual reading/browsing of a wide variety of visual/verbal texts. You will also apply the analytical approaches discussed in class to an independently selected graphic novel.

**COMPOSING:** You will compose a relatively brief graphic text--one that you can use as an example with your own students and one that employs the principles of graphic novels reviewed in your readings and class.
TEACHING: As a class, we will design an introductory unit of study of graphic novels for a 9th grade reading class. Individually, you will then develop an intriguing, effective lesson focused on a graphic text(s) that you will teach in that class (or one of your own). You will “write up” your experiences as a scholarly article that we hope to publish.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING: We will collaborate on all elements of the course activities, in different ways. Also, you should integrate collaborative and cooperative learning into the lesson that you develop for students. Social construction of meaning in this course will include “overt” or active interventions by teachers and other experts. Active interventions and other types of collaborations necessarily involve metalanguage—specialized languages of reflection and generalization that “describe the form, content, and function of the discourses of practice” (Vygotsky and Luria, 2004).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Graded Assignments and Total Points of Each (100 points total)

1. Informal notes on assigned readings (use Wordpress.com) and participation in discussion. We will sometimes select one of your notes to show in class and discuss it. Notes must “range” from the reading’s large points, to its details: 20%

2. Response and Analysis Paper focused on one Graphic Novel of your choice, selected from in-class browsing of our titles: 20%

3. Graphic Mini-Narrative: 25%

4. Planning and teaching of Visual Literacy Lesson, resulting in a substantial, interesting scholarly article, as per guidelines (e.g., your personal experience with graphic novels; rationale for text and teaching methods; results, including quotes from students and examples of their work, etc.): 35%

We hope to compile these essays into a book, similar to Becoming a Hero: Teachers’ First Experiences with Comics in the Classroom.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Note: Please be attuned to changes in assignments, due-dates, etc., as mentioned in class and/or on the Blackboard site.
JANUARY 19:  Introductions; review of course, assignments, etc. Snack sign up. Browsing time for Graphic Novels.

JANUARY 26:  Discuss “The Nature and Power of Images” (Barry) and “A Plea for Visual Thinking.” Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Browsing time for Graphic Novels.

FEBRUARY 2:  Discuss “When Image Meets Word” (*The Visual Turn and the Transformation of the Textbook*, Laspina) and “Perception and Visual ‘Common Sense’” (*Visual Intelligence*, Barry). Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Browsing time for Graphic Novels.

FEBRUARY 9:  Discuss article on narrative patterns in literature and media. Title TBA (e.g., Fiske, Gee?). Discuss Ch. 1, “Setting the Record Straight” in McCloud. Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Browsing time for Graphic Novels.

FEBRURY 16:  Discuss Ch. 2 (“The Vocabulary of Comics”), Ch. 5 (“Living the Line”), and Ch. 8 (“A Word About Color”) in McCloud. Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Browsing time for Graphic Novels – find examples of McCloud principles and share via Elmo projector.

FEBRUARY 23:  Discuss Ch. 3 (“Blood in the Gutter”) and Ch. 4 (“Time Frames”) in McCloud. Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Browsing time for Graphic Novels – find examples of McCloud principles and share via Elmo projector. [Fox in PA].

MARCH 2:  Discuss Ch. 6 (“Show and Tell”), Ch. 7 (“The Six Steps”), and Ch. 9 (“Putting it all Together”) in McCloud. Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Using McCloud Ch 7. as a framework, discuss possibilities for creating your own Graphic Short Story (or other genre) with small group, partners, and/or instructors.

MARCH 9:  Discuss articles about using comics in the classroom; titles TBA (Possible sources: SANE Journal, Rationales for Graphic Novels, Lessons from the Comic Book Project - Bitz). Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Brainstorm and plan, as a class, a 3-week introductory unit of study for the graphic novel for a 9th grade Reading Enrichment class; this will serve as the context for you to develop your individual teaching lessons. Discuss guidelines for the lessons and the articles that will be written following the field experience.
MARCH 16: Discuss Beginning – p. 121 of Kings in Disguise. Notes on Wordpress.com due at 6 pm tonight on this reading. Explore (and demonstrate) approaches to teaching historical and cultural context when teaching this Graphic Novel. Work with small group, partner, and/or instructors on revising your Graphic Novel Analysis Paper. Discuss plans for teaching lesson.

MARCH 23: Discuss p. 122 – End of Kings in Disguise. Notes on Wordpress.com due at 6 pm tonight on this reading. Explore (and demonstrate) more approaches to teaching historical and cultural context when teaching this Graphic Novel. Submit written description or outline of the lesson you plan to teach—not to exceed 2-3 double-spaced pages.

MARCH 30: Spring Break: March 26 – April 4 // Safe Driving required!

[Note: Unless alternative plans have been made for your own independent classroom, field experiences will occur between April 4th and April 22nd at Oakland Junior High School from 8:55 until 9:45. Lessons will be facilitated individually, and you will sign up for dates during the unit planning session. Most lessons will probably span 2-3 periods.]

APRIL 6: Graphic Novel Response and Analysis Paper due tonight! In-Class Writing Workshop – Guided tutorials for two compositional approaches: 1) adapting a verbal text into a visual/verbal format and 2) instructive scriptwriting for original graphic narratives. Brainstorming and/or prewriting of your own graphic text.

APRIL 13: Discuss stereotypes in visual texts: “Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Beautiful: A Commercial in Context” (Images in Language, Media, & Mind, Grow in Fox, ed.) and “The Disposable Sex: Men in the News”; “Lawyer Stereotypes”; and “Women as Mothers” (Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media (Lester). Notes on Wordpress.com for these readings due at 6 pm tonight. Submit a written description of your plan for your own Graphic text—not to exceed 2-3 double-spaced pages.

APRIL 20: Discuss Beginning – p. 107 of American Born Chinese. Notes on Wordpress.com for this reading due at 6 pm tonight. Collaborate with others on your graphic text and/or teaching chapter, to solve problems, get better ideas, etc.

MAY 4: Finishing up: responses to graphic texts; individual conferences re: teaching chapter, graphic text, etc.

MAY 11: Graphic Mini-Narrative and Teaching Chapter due tonight! Sharing of your own Graphic text and/or teaching of graphic text experiences. Complete course evaluations.

THE FINE PRINT:

Academic Dishonesty

Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all You is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor.

Academic Dishonesty includes but is not necessarily limited to the following:

A. Cheating or knowingly assisting another student in committing an act of cheating or other academic dishonesty.
B. Plagiarism which includes but is not necessarily limited to submitting examinations, themes, reports, drawings, laboratory notes, or other material as one's own work when such work has been prepared by another person or copied from another person.
C. Unauthorized possession of examinations or reserve library materials, or laboratory materials or experiments, or any other similar actions.
D. Unauthorized changing of grades or markings on an examination or in an instructor's grade book or such change of any grade report.

The University has specific academic dishonesty administrative procedures. Although policy states that cases of academic dishonesty must be reported to the Office of the Provost for possible action, the instructor may assign a failing grade for the assignment or a failing grade for the course, or may adjust the grade as deemed appropriate. The instructor also may require the student to repeat the assignment or to perform additional assignments.
University of Missouri Notice of Nondiscrimination

The University of Missouri-Columbia does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, disability, or status as a disabled veteran, or veteran of the Vietnam era. For more information, please see the University of Missouri-Columbia official Statement of Nondiscrimination.

ADA Statement

If you have special needs as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and need assistance, please notify the Office of Disability Services at 573-882-4696 or course instructor immediately. Complete information is available online. Reasonable efforts will be made to accommodate your special needs.

APPENDIX A: GUIDELINES FOR INFORMAL NOTES ON READINGS:

These guidelines will be converted into a rubric for evaluating your notes on readings (completed in your WordPress.com account). The total point value for the course notes is 30%.

1. State the complete title and author at the top of the page.
2. Summarize the entire reading in 1-2 sentences, using general terms (e.g., “Postman criticizes the media-information environment in terms of the media itself, as well as our response to media messages.”).
3. List the major “chunks” or “sections” of the reading. These may be stated directly in the reading or you may have to divide the reading into chunks and label these stages yourself.
4. Select 2-3 of the most important chunks or sections and summarize it by…
   A) Stating its main idea, assertion, or question
   B) Describing 1-2 very specific details, illustrations, or examples of each main idea.
5. What is YOUR OWN response to this material? Try to include 1-2 strengths, as well as weaknesses.
Reading Enrichment

OJHS – Language Arts – 8th/9th

Mr. Nick Kremer
nkremer@columbia.k12.mo.us
Room: 020
Phone: 214-3220
Conference Period: 8:00-8:50

Course Description: This is an elective Language Arts class for proficient readers who love to read and talk about literature. Students will expand their literacy skills through immersive studies into various genres and media of literature. Class time will be split between reading workshop, where students will individually choose and read books within a given area of study; discussion seminars, where students will read and talk about short, teacher-selected stories; and (occasionally) writing workshops, where students will experiment with their own creative writing in the given area of study. Genres and media covered will include: Realism, Historical Nonfiction, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Plot Genres, Nonfiction, Mythology, Poetry, Theatre, Graphic Novels, and Film.

Course Objectives: By the end of this course, a student will be able to…
- Identify the medium/genre of a piece of literature
- Articulate the defining characteristics of a medium/genre
- Read, comprehend, and meaningfully respond to texts without professional guidance
- Evaluate a piece of literature critically for multiple standards
- Demonstrate basic creative writing skills within various media/genres of literature

Classroom Expectations: The expectations for participants in this course can be simplified to two basic standards – Respect and Responsibility. I, too, am a course participant – I promise to respect students’ individuality, opinions, needs, and goals, to maintain a positive and safe learning environment, and to provide engaging, quality instruction that will allow students to achieve (and exceed) all course objectives. In turn, I expect students to show an equal level of respect to me and each other (especially in
regard to people’s personal tastes as we read different types of literature – be sure to keep an open mind!), to apply themselves with full effort in all class activities, to come to class prepared, and to complete assignments in a timely manner.

**Classroom Requirements:**

- Students will have lots of opportunities for independent reading time in this class (approximately 60% of class time each week). As such, **always bring a book with you**!!
- Students will also need a **reading journal** for this course; a small composition notebook or diary will suffice. Since it will be periodically collected for assessment, please don’t keep notes/assignments for other courses in it!
- Please do not bring food/drink to class; space in Room 020 is tight, and we will frequently be visiting the Media Center and computer labs, where food/drink is strictly prohibited.
- Adherence to all OJHS polices (including dress code + cell phones) is expected/enforced.

**Course Schedule - Weekly:**

The following schedule is the general routine we will use in class; please pay attention to announcements and the Course Calendar for changes to this schedule. Please report immediately to the Media Center on designated days.

* Mon/Wed/Fri – Media Center – Independent Reading Workshop
* Tue/Thu – Room 020 – Genre Study (full-class lessons)

**Course Schedule – Yearly:**

The course is broken into 3-week units for each of the following areas of study:

* Semester 1:  Introduction to Literary Study; Realistic Fiction; Historical Fiction; Science Fiction; Fantasy; Plot Genres (Ex: Mystery, Romance, etc)

* Semester 2: Nonfiction – Memoir/Biography; Mythology/Classics; Poetry; Theatre; Visual Texts/Graphic Novels; Film

**Assignments/Grading:**

- **Reading Workshop [30%]** – Students will receive points each Reading Workshop period for actively engaging in their independent study (reading or journaling) that day. If a student is absent, he/she will need to read at home for an hour to stay caught up with our pacing.

- **Reading Journals [40%]** – Since all books in this course are selected and read individually, students will be required to periodically document their thinking
about their novel (in response to content-specific, teacher-generated questions) in a reading journal. Students will also be asked to evaluate the books they read each month and share those reviews with their classmates. Generally, students will complete five 150-200 word responses for each book.

- **Discussion Seminar** [15%] – At the end of each unit, students will also be required to participate in a student-led Socratic seminar, where students will orally share their literacy experiences from their individually-chosen texts to collaboratively answer a broad literary question provided by the teacher.

- **Writing Projects** [15%] – At the end of each unit, students will participate in a creative writing project that asks them to apply the characteristics they have learned about the genre/medium studied that month. Due to the nature of this course, projects will primarily be graded for application of literary concepts, not the professional quality of the writing. The assignment is meant to be a low-risk exploration of different types of creative writing, while assessing what a student has learned about literature through their reading. Students will continue to develop/adapt a single story throughout the course of the entire year.

**Grading Policies:**

- **Grading Scale**: Reading Enrichment uses the high school grading scale [A = 90%-100%, B = 80%-89%, C = 70% - 79%, D = 60% - 69%, F = 59% or below]

- **Late Work**: All assignments are due on the specified date. Except in cases of absences or extenuating circumstances where prior arrangements have been discussed with me in advance, late work will incur a 10% penalty. However, **late work will always be accepted until the last week of each semester**. I will not allow procrastination to be an excuse to get out of completing an essential assignment!
APPENDIX C
GRADUATE STUDENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of Missouri-Columbia:
IRB Informed Consent Form for Research Participation
Project: Comics in the Classroom – A Grounded Theory of Sequential Art Narrative Pedagogy
Researcher: Nick Kremer IRB: 1185818

Participation: You are being asked to participate in a research study. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. This form will inform you about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participate. Refusal to participate in the study will result in no consequences of any kind. If you consent to participate, you have the right to stop the study at any time without penalty.

Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this research project is to investigate the processes that teachers and students undergo in studying sequential art narratives and develop a grounded theory of best practices for teaching visual texts in secondary school classrooms.

Nature of Participation: All graduate students enrolled in LTC 8640 “Reading, Writing, and Teaching the Graphic Novel” at UMC during winter semester 2011 will be invited to participate in this study. The study will span the duration of the course. Outside of normal participation in the course, subjects will participate in the study in the following ways: (a) your proceedings in class will be observed and video-recorded; (b) you will be asked to participate in two, hour-long, recorded, live interviews with the researcher relating to your field teaching experience; and (c) your original compositions and reflections submitted as assignments for the course will be analyzed and possibly included in the final research publication.

Confidentiality: Your identity and participation will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all presentations and publications. Video/audio recordings of interviews and copies of assignments will only be accessed by the researcher and kept for up to 3 years after the completion of the study.

Benefits: This study will create an opportunity for you to reflect deeply on your educational experience in the course in which you are enrolled. It will also potentially
benefit future teachers and students who study sequential art narratives by offering insight into the pedagogy involved therein.

*Risks:* Your participation in this study is not expected to cause you any risks greater than those experienced in daily life.

*Questions:* Should you have questions about the project, please contact the researcher, Nick Kremer, at (573) 808-5710 or nkremer@columbia.k12.mo.us. For further information regarding participation, feel free to contact the UMC Campus IRB Office at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

SIGNATURES:
*I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do want to be in the study. I know that I can remove myself from the study at any time without recourse.*

Participant Signature ____________________________ Date ____________
APPENDIX D
JUNIOR HIGH STUDENT YOUTH ASSENT FORM

University of Missouri-Columbia:
IRB Youth Assent Form for Research Participation
Project: Comics in the Classroom – A Grounded Theory of Sequential Art Narrative Pedagogy
Researcher: Nick Kremer

Participation: Members of your Reading Enrichment class at Oakland Junior High School are being asked to participate in a research study. This form will tell you about the project so that you can decide if you want to participate. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time, for any reason. There are no penalties for saying no to participating in this study.

Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this research project is to find out what happens when comic books are used in a high school English classroom and what the best ways to teach comics are.

Activities: If you choose to participate in the study, after the graphic novel unit in April, you will be asked to (a) answer questions about the unit during a recorded interview with a researcher during your study hall/advisory period; and (b) let your assignments be used in the research study.

Confidentiality: Your real name will remain confidential in the research study; a “code name” will be assigned to your responses and your assignments so no one will know what you said/did.

Benefits: You will get to experience a professional interview, think deeply about the activities you did in class during the graphic novel unit, and help future students + teachers learn more about comics.

Risks: There are no real risks for participating in this study.

Questions: Should you have questions about the project, please contact our OJHS principal, Dr. Presko.

SIGNATURES:
I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do want to be in the study. I know that I can remove myself from the study at any time without penalty.

Participant Signature _________________________________  Date ____________
APPENDIX E

JUNIOR HIGH STUDENT PARENT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of Missouri-Columbia:
IRB Informed Consent Form for Research Participation

Project: Comics in the Classroom – A Grounded Theory of Sequential Art Narrative Pedagogy
Researcher: Nick Kremer   IRB: 1185818

Participation: Your student is being asked to participate in a research study. Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. This form will inform you about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent for your student to participate. Refusal to participate in the study will result in no consequences of any kind. If you consent for your student to participate, you have the right to stop the study at any time without penalty.

Purpose of the Project: The purpose of this research project is to investigate the processes that teachers and students undergo in studying sequential art narratives and develop a grounded theory of best practices for teaching visual texts in secondary school classrooms.

Nature of Participation: All 8th and 9th grade students enrolled in Reading Enrichment at Oakland Junior High School will be invited to participate in this study. The study will span the duration of the course’s graphic novel unit in April 2011. Outside of normal participation in the course, subjects will participate in the study in the following ways: (a) they will be asked to participate in an hour-long, recorded, live interview with the researcher during their study hall/advisory period relating to their experiences during the unit; and (b) their original compositions and reflections submitted as assignments for the unit will be analyzed and possibly included in the final research publication.

Confidentiality: Your student’s identity and participation will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in all presentations and publications. Audio recordings of interviews and copies of assignments will only be accessed by the researcher and kept for up to 3 years after the completion of the study.

Benefits: This study will create an opportunity for your student to reflect deeply on his/her educational experience in the course in which he/she is enrolled. It will also potentially benefit future teachers and students who study sequential art narratives by offering insight into the pedagogy involved therein.
Risks: Your student’s participation in this study is not expected to cause him/her any risks greater than those experienced in daily life.

Questions: Should you have questions about the project, please contact the researcher, Nick Kremer, at (573) 808-5710 or nkremer@columbia.k12.mo.us. For further information regarding participation, feel free to contact the UMC Campus IRB Office at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

SIGNATURES:
I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do consent for my child to be in the study. I know that I can remove him/her from the study at any time.

Name of Participant ______________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature ___________________________ Date ____________
APPENDIX F
READING JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT FOR JHS SAN UNIT

Reading Journal – Graphic Novel

ENTRIES:

***Each entry should be at least 150 words***

Entry 1: [to be completed during the first half of the book]

Choose a specific page from your book. Discuss the artistic choices made on that page. Why do you think the artist chose the paneling, encapsulation (perspective, framing, positioning), lettering, and colors that he/she did?

Entry 2: [to be completed during the first half of the book]

Discuss the level of abstraction in your book. How realistic-looking are the characters? The setting? Why do you think the writer chose to use the style he/she did?

Entry 3: [to be completed at the end of the book]

What genre of setting (historical fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, science fiction, or nonfiction) would you classify your book as? What genre of plot (action, adventure, drama, romance, mystery, comedy, tragedy, satire, etc.) would you classify your book as? WHY??

Entry 4: [to be completed at the end of the book]

How was reading a graphic novel different from reading a regular novel? What are the advantages and disadvantages? How would reading your story change in a different medium?
APPENDIX G
DR. FOX’s SAN COMPOSITION PROCESS NOTES

Process Notes for Odd Fellows Graphic Novel (Fox)
April 6, 2011

1. No think “sketch” (too small and lose these) or “paint”—think line drawing (you get better after a few). Add in color and simple sketch lines later.
2. Make people expressive via eyes and mouth!
3. Decide on portrait vs. landscape mode to fit the content of art.
4. If you have wrinkled paper to scan (watercolor), place heavy book on top; however, wrinkled paper can give a glowing, mottled look you may want.
5. Don’t forget similes that are fresh.
6. You should get ideas from the visual only (for visual and verbal), as well as from the verbal only (also for both). Don’t forget to alternate your attention back and forth, though one will often dominate.
7. If you don’t know the end that violates expectations, continue anyway (eg. of T. cutting microphone cord).
8. Use active, precise verbs.
9. Resonance, echo, of symbol, theme (eg, freaks, 3 interlocking rings of lodge, ring toss game, halo as ring).
10. Do different angles for point of view.
11. Specific dates, names, places.
12. Begin with a list of scenes, preferably single-frame.
13. Use a story from your life and embellish it any way you want to make a better story!
14. Include nonfiction, history, background in small doses, just so it does not detract from narrative.
15. There are FEW straight lines in life—so don’t use them for people and live things.
16. Research can give you ideas (I res. lodge hall, carnivals of 50s, freaks, etc. and got ideas).
17. If one frame is too complex, do it as two.
18. Continually flip thru your story and visuals to find gaps.
19. If too much dialogue, split and do as two frames.
20. Once you do a few images or frames, you’ll go faster; trust in that; you’ll also improve.
21. Some image ideas come as wholes; others take form in the middle of drawing something or in the middle of writing text.
22. Use running list before, during, and after.
23. Not just the images are important—but the DESIGN—how they are framed, what is around them. (See eks of celebration of Ruby and depression of boy). Use lines and colors to emphasize some things and downplay others, use for mood.

24. Show some things as “cut off” or partial views so reader can fill in.

25. Make notes to yourself as you get ideas or you’ll get distracted and forget them.

26. Pay attention to some elements that occur often throughout the story (eg, mine = stars, rings).

27. Easiest = draw, watercolor > scan > manipulate image in Photoshop.
APPENDIX H
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Comics in the Classroom Interview Protocol: Graduate Student, Pre-Field Teaching

Subject Code:
Date/Time:
Location:

I] Greeting and chance for subject to ask questions about the interview

II] Obtain consent to record

III] Questions:

1) Icebreaker: How are things going so far this semester for you?

2) How have your experiences in the Graphic Novel course been thus far?
   A) Why did you enroll in this course?
   B) What were your opinions regarding graphic novels before taking this course? Have they changed any?
   C) What has been your experience with (1) reading graphic novels and (2) writing graphic texts in the class thus far?

3) How do you feel going into your field teaching experience:
   A) In what ways do you feel well-prepared or unprepared regarding your knowledge of the content you will be teaching?
   B) How useful were the course readings in preparing you for class?
   C) How useful were course activities (Discussion, assignments, reading time, etc.)?
   D) What other factors are causing apprehension?

4) Describe the lesson you are planning to teach during your field experience:
   A) What pedagogical strategies will you use?
   B) What visual-verbal texts will you use?
   C) What theme have you chosen for your lesson? Why?
   D) In what ways will the students be engaged in reading, writing, talking?
   E) What artifacts will students create?
5) What are the intended educational outcomes for your lesson?
   A) What are the essential objectives you are trying to teach?
   B) How will you assess whether these outcomes have been met by all students?
   C) How do these outcomes compare to typical Language Arts objectives in a secondary school classroom? Should they be taught?

6) Based on your experiences thus far, why should/shouldn’t graphic novels be used in a Language Arts secondary school classroom?
Comics in the Classroom Interview Protocol: Graduate Student, Post-Field Teaching

Subject Code:  
Date/Time:  
Location:  

I] Greeting and chance for subject to ask questions about the interview  

II] Obtain consent to record  

III] Questions:  
[Note: subject’s previous transcript may need to be available to reference responses]  

1) Icebreaker: Are you ready for the end of the semester?  

2) How have your experiences in the Graphic Novel course changed since our last interview, before your field teaching experience?  

3) Describe your field teaching experience:  
   E) Did the reality of the situation match your feelings going into the lesson?  
   F) Did your predictions about the level of preparation you had going into the lesson prove to be true? Where did you feel well-prepared vs. unprepared?  
   G) Describe, from your memory and perception, the events that transpired during the lesson and try to reconstruct for me your internal thought processes at each important point of the experience.  
   H) How (if at all) and why did you change or deviate from your original plans?  

4) How do you think students responded to your lesson?  
   D) Were the intended educational outcomes met for all students?  
      Describe the range of achievement and competency demonstrated by students.  
   E) Describe the artifacts students produced as a result of your lesson.  
   F) What was your general impression of student engagement and learning?
5) If you were to re-teach the lesson, what aspects would keep the same and what changes would you make?
   F) How effective were the pedagogical strategies that you used?
   G) How effective were the visual-verbal texts that you used?
   H) How effective was the theme you chose for your lesson
   I) How effective were the assignments/activities you created?
   J) How effective were the assessment tools you used?

6) Based on your experiences, what are effective ways of teaching graphic novels in the classroom?

7) Based on your experiences, why should/shouldn’t graphic novels be used in a Language Arts secondary school classroom?
Comics in the Classroom Interview Protocol: Junior High Student, Post-Unit

Subject Code:
Date/Time:
Location:

I] Greeting and chance for subject to ask questions about the interview

II] Obtain consent to record

III] Questions:

7) Icebreaker: How are your classes going? Are you ready for the end of the year?

8) What did you think of the Graphic Novel unit?
    A) How would you compare your interest, engagement, and achievement in it to other units we’ve studied this year? [ask each item separately; define as needed]

9) During the unit, you read graphic novels in different ways – as an individual, with a partner, as a small group, and as a full class. Which method was the most effective for you? Why?
    A) [Follow-up questions will be determined based on student response]
    B) Is the same strategy effective when you read non-visual texts?
    C) Did graphic novels help you better understand the text you were reading?

10) During the unit, you also created several of your own graphic mini-narratives. Which approach to writing – adapting it from an existing prose story, developing an original visual story, or writing directions for an illustrator – did you find the most effective?
    A) [Follow-up questions will be determined based on student response]
    B) Which genre (poetry, script, prose) did you find it most easy to adapt?
    C) How useful was the computer software in designing your composition?
    D) Was it easier to work as an individual or with a partner?
11) The Graphic Novel unit was taught by a variety of instructors. Were there certain instructors whom you thought were particularly effective or ineffective? Why?
   A) How did having so many different instructors impact your overall educational experience during the unit?

12) After participating in the Graphic Novel unit, do you find yourself looking at images around you differently? Give examples.
   A) Do you view advertisements differently? Art? Photography?

13) How (if at all) did the Graphic Novel unit change your opinions about reading?
   A) How would you now define reading? Was this different than before?

14) What is the most important thing you learned during the Graphic Novel unit?
   A) Why should/shouldn’t graphic novels be used in this class?
   B) What do you think is the best way for a teacher to teach graphic novels?
REFERENCES


VITA

Nicholas T. Kremer was born and raised in Jefferson City, Missouri. He attended Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri, where he graduated as valedictorian with a B.A. in English in 2005, a M.A. in English in 2006, and a M.A.E. in Secondary Education in 2007 after completing a full-year internship at Fulton High School in Fulton, Missouri. Nicholas then taught a variety of courses at a junior high school in Columbia, Missouri for four years before becoming the Coordinator of English Language Arts and Social Studies for Columbia Public Schools, a role in which he continues to serve. Nick graduated with a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction (English Education emphasis) from the University of Missouri - Columbia in May 2017 and has taught (and continues to teach) a variety of education courses for the University of Missouri, Columbia College, and Truman State University.

Nicholas has published several articles in professional journals and given numerous presentations at national conferences on the topic of visual literacy and the specific medium of sequential art narratives. He lives in Columbia with his wife, Ashley, his Hurricane Katrina refugee (dog), Tara, and his five children – Liam, Ellison, Atticus, Ezra, and Asa – all of whom came into life during various stages of his doctoral program. All of the aforementioned Kremers are excited to move on to a new chapter in this “comic” book of life...