

**LITERACY THROUGH GRAPHIC NOVELS:
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL JOURNEY OF DEVELOPING TEACHER IDENTITY**

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the writer's growth as a literate person and her emerging identity as a teacher and describes personal and educational experiences that influenced her beliefs about teaching. There is particular emphasis on the comics medium as a continuing thread in the development of her teaching identity. An autobiographical graphic novella was created to demonstrate the reflective process, the effectiveness of the graphic medium, and personal teacher identity. Among the influences on her identity were gender, race, class, adolescent experiences, academic experiences in undergraduate, preservice teacher education and graduate school. Her findings include an understanding of how many factors throughout her life influenced both her literate and teacher identities. By understanding the factors that shape one's identity, one can better understand and embrace one's evolving identity as a teacher; this can result in ultimately more effective, and sometimes more passionate, teaching.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all passionate teachers.

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) believe that the “the aim of self-study research is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (p. 20). I aim to provoke the beginning of questioning your own identity, to challenge you to discover a better understanding of the benefits of self-reflection through your own self-discovery, and to illuminate and encourage the process of identity discovery to inform your passionate teaching. I also hope that you consider the vast and very beneficial teacher resources available in graphic literacy in order to discover their valuable influence in affecting students’ literate identities. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to the two passionate teachers who have inspired my love of literature, and taught me more than I ever thought possible, my parents, Joe and Andrea Maceyovski.

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OVERVIEW

This thesis explores my identity as a literate person and as a beginning Secondary English teacher; it emphasizes the comic medium, which has been a powerful influence on the development of my literate and teacher identities. Through the creation of an autobiographical graphic novella, I explore the reflective process, the effectiveness of the graphic medium and the development of my evolving teacher identity.

Below, I present an overview of the study's rationale, research questions, methodology, personal ground, significance and limitations. The rationale and methodology are further developed in subsequent chapters.

Rationale

I am certain that comic books helped teach me how to read. I am also certain that graphic literature has shaped my life in many ways. I embraced comics culture at a young age, and became interested in the promotion of literacy through multimodal means when I enrolled in a course at the University of Windsor with Dr. Dale Jacobs. He taught the rhetoric surrounding graphic novels, and although this class was not where my obsession with comic books began, it was where my eyes were opened to the possibility of promoting literacy in the classroom by means other than standard text.

What sparked my interest were his discussions about comics as complex, multimodal text (Jacobs, 2007) that he believes should be, but are usually not, regarded as such. This concept started my thinking about how I could implement graphic novels in *my* future classroom. Thus, I began my search to better understand the medium as a teaching resource. As I researched the graphic medium, I began to realize the impact that graphic literacy has had on my identity as a literate being, and how literacy has informed

my identity as a beginning teacher.

Identity is formed through human experience that is intrinsically dynamic and constantly evolving in response to life events and circumstances (Bartlett, 2007). As a child reading superhero comics, I was unaware of the benefits they had for developing my identity as a literate being, in terms of my proficiency in reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. As a university student wanting an escape from reality, I was unaware of the implications of this medium for my future as an educator. The impact that graphic literacy had on my identity formation as a literate person, as well as the role gender played, helped shape not only my literate identity, but my teacher identity as well.

Through a process of understanding the importance of teaching and learning through graphic literacy, I developed beliefs and values about comics as a teaching resource. Seyfried (2008) notes that teachers “have begun using graphic novels to increase students’ confidence as readers and to develop their enjoyment of reading,” (p. 48). Edwards (2009) asserts that reading graphic medium positively affects students’ “intrinsic motivation, vocabulary and comprehension ability” (p. 57). As a future English teacher, I hope to implement graphic and visual literacy whenever possible.

Personal prior experiences help shape preservice teacher identity (Aquino, 2012) and my positive experiences with comic medium and graphic literacy have shaped my future teacher practices and my views on classroom implementation. My experiences learning the rhetoric of comics from Dr. Jacobs also positively impacted my future practices. Jacobs (2007) discusses the power of comics in the classroom:

By complicating our view of comics so that we do not see them as simply an intermediary step to more complex word-based literacy, we can more effectively help students become active creators, rather than passive consumers, of meaning in their interactions with a wide variety of multimodal texts. In doing so, we

harness the real power of comics in the classroom and prepare students for better negotiating their worlds of meaning. (p. 24)

In addition to utilizing graphic literacy in many aspects and avenues of my future classroom, I will encourage students to create their own comics and graphic novels. Park (2010) believes this activity “ties in very well with the stated goals of many English curricula to include representation and viewing in the language activities of the classroom” (p. 180).

Research Questions

Since graphic literacy has greatly impacted my literate identity, I wondered what the benefits might be to creating a graphic work in order to better understand my teacher identity. The following research questions guided my self-study.

- What were/are the influences on my development as a literate human being?
- What were/are the influences on my emerging identity as a secondary English teacher?
- How did graphic novels inform the development of my identities?
- What is the nature and potential of graphic novels for engaging students in literacy learning in secondary English classrooms?
- Lastly, and most importantly, how does the process of creating a graphic autobiography facilitate the development of one's teacher identity?

This study attempted to connect my identity formation to self-study through the medium of graphic novels.

Methodology

In order to fully explore how the process of creating a graphic autobiography facilitated the development of my teacher identity, I sought to understand the potential impact of graphic literacy, the complexities of the medium, and the intricacies of the process of reflection. Through the use of digitally-manipulated photographs on paneled

pages, I digitally storied many social and educational experiences that influenced my identity as a literate human being and as a beginning English teacher. This methodology draws upon work in the areas of autobiography (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; L'Abate, 2007; Solas, 1992) and narrative research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Eisner, 1998).

Personal Ground

Many aspects of my self-identity are related to my literate identity: student, lifelong learner, avid reader, writer, visual learner, educator, and comic/graphic literacy fan and advocate. This literate aspect of my identity has been shaped through my relationships with family, peers, society, culture, media, and academia.

One aspect of my identity is deeply rooted in being a literate person, and having a passion for literature. Being a literate person is more than simply being able to read. It is an individualized identity that one creates by being immersed, interested, and invested, in everything one reads on a regular (or day-to-day) basis. I read because I have a passion for it. Part of my personality is directly linked to my identity as a literate being. As I matured, my passion for graphic literacy grew stronger, but it was not until university that I realized the potential to intertwine my pastime obsession with my future as a classroom educator.

A negative societal view of comics initially, albeit temporarily, interrupted my reading comics. Jacobs (2007) explains the history of attitudes towards comics:

Prior to their current renaissance, comics were often viewed, at best, as popular entertainment and, at worst, as a dangerous influence on youth. Such attitudes were certainly prevalent in the early 1950's when comics were at their most popular, with critics such as Fredric Wertham voicing the most strenuous arguments against comics in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*" (p. 19).

Wertham (1954) argued that in ‘reading’ comics, children focus far too much on the image to make meaning and avoid engaging with the written word. Such negative associations with the medium extended to many aspects of my life: my classmates were bullies; my friends teased me; and my family did not comprehend the appeal.

For me, over the last decade, however, there has been a movement to establish the value of graphic literacy in education; Jacobs (2007) notes “comics have made their way into schools mainly as a scaffold for later learning that is perceived to be more difficult, in terms of both the literate practices and content involved” (p. 20).

Accordingly, the presence of graphic novels in libraries has increased, as they can help libraries appeal to so-called reluctant readers who seem to show little interest in reading or in libraries (Crawford, 2004). Eventually my family understood and my parents realized they should just be happy that I was reading, and I would come home to find new comics on my bed. Thus, my parents became instrumental in supporting a comic book fascination that soon spread to include memorabilia, collector’s items and graphic novels. Their involvement and support of this pastime led to my attraction to graphic literacy later in life.

My identity as a teacher began to emerge from my existing identity as a white woman, student, literate person, avid reader, and comics enthusiast. These influences will be presented in the graphic novella and discussed in the exegesis. I have not yet worked as a full-time teacher. This places serious limitations on the formation of my teacher identity, an identity that will evolve as I gain more real-world experience in the profession. I should also note that when I graduated from the Bachelor of Education program, I dismissed the learning that I had experienced because I lacked a sense of

teacher preparedness (Kosnik & Beck, 2008) for secondary English teaching. The self-study and review of the literature enabled me to begin to reflect on my learning in my professional degree; and I have come to understand the continuum of ongoing professional learning in my identity formation as a practicing teacher.

As a Caucasian, middle-class female, my background and social status afforded me many privileges throughout the development of both my literate and teacher identities. Some privileges include access to literature, support of my enthusiasm for the comic medium, educated and educationally helpful parents, and a surrounding community of supportive family and friends. Hammet and Sanford (2008) note that factors of gender, class, and race affect the educational literacy experiences of students, and contend that educators must be “aware of the beliefs and values implicit in the language we use to describe issues of gender” (p. 9) because generalizations of gender and gender stereotypes discourage “an in-depth examination of the issues, [and] a consideration of the impact of other social constructions such as class, race, or sexual orientation” (p. 13).

Gender role theorists and social constructivists argue that social roles influence many aspects of personality (Brody, 1999; Eagly, 1987). Hammet and Sanford (2008) assert that there is a “depth and complexity surrounding literacy and gender” (p. 9) and that it is not possible to talk and think about gender and literacy without talking and thinking about feminist discourses and discourses of masculinity. My gender influenced how society, family, peers, and teachers viewed, and responded to, my reading choices, which impacted my literate and teacher identities.

Class is another factor that I must acknowledge in my identity formation.

Langston (1995) describes class as one's "understanding of the world and where you fit in; it's composed of ideas, behavior, attitudes, values, and language....class is socially constructed and all-encompassing" (p. 102). My class status afforded me educational opportunities and access to literature, which shaped my ideas, behaviors and attitudes towards academia.

Furthermore, my status as a white woman also influenced my identity. According to racial identity models, race is a social rather than a biological construct, (Cameron & Wycoff, 1998; Helms, 1995) and racial identity refers to a person's psychological orientation to race and is an important aspect of one's identity (Jones & Carter, 1996). Racial identity assists the individual in making meaning of and interpreting a racial event, as well as in creating and maintaining social relationships (Helms, 1995).

The social relationship that affected my identity the most was the relationship with my parents; I was fortunate to have parents who had the means to provide for me emotionally, mentally and financially. They supported my love of literature and were able to constantly provide reading material, a privilege that greatly influenced my literate identity. Although my gender affected how society perceived my reading choices, my desire for the medium never faltered because of the support I had at home. This support translated to all areas of my identity, but the educational support I was given shaped both my literate and teacher identities from a young age. I am aware that my passion for comics/graphic novels may have led to an uncritical acceptance of the medium and superficial thought about the criteria for selecting appropriate teacher resources for secondary English classrooms. To address these limitations, I have tried to maintain a critical metacognitive stance by reflecting on the inter-relations among race, gender and

class in my own love for comics and on how these relations will influence my curriculum decision-making as an educator.

When I first articulated my personal ground I was aware of the influences of gender, class and race on my identity as a secondary English teacher. However, the creation of my autobiographical novella enabled me to reflect more deeply on my assumptions and beliefs about my identity. These new insights are developed further in the Exegesis.

Significance

There are several important contributions to educational research and practice that grow out of this study. Firstly, it contributes to the understanding of identity and the formation of my identity as a literate human being. Secondly, it illustrates relations between my identity as a literate human being and the ongoing development of my teacher identity. Lastly, it illuminates the power of the comics medium to represent the influences on the development of my identities and the potential for engaging students in secondary English classrooms.

Limitations

Self-study or autobiography is not without limitations; one should be cognizant of these limitations and take appropriate steps to mitigate their influence. Some limitations of autobiographical research include author authenticity, author reliability, and memory validity, credibility and trustworthiness (Ceci & Loftus, 1994; Nakash and Brody, 2006; Setliff & Marmurek, 2002). Clements (2001) discusses ‘fictive voice’ for what we believe to be true memories, which in fact can be false or recreated purely through own perspectives or interpretation of them with the deployment of hindsight. One’s memories

are reflections of stories, and stories are presumed to provide a holistic context that allows individuals to reflect and reconstruct their personal, historical, and cultural experiences (Gill, 2001). Stories are essentially individual constructs of human experience, and have limitations that may affect objectivity in presentation; there are always other stories within a story, which have not been explored (Schon, 1991).

Accordingly, Greenhalgh (2005) discusses the challenge of autobiographical research:

a story is an interaction—an artistic and rhetorical performance for an audience who (actively or passively) shapes the telling. The challenge ... is not to “control for” the inherent subjectivity, inconsistency, and emotionality of stories but to capture these phenomena as data and interpret them appropriately. (p. 444)

It is the researcher’s task to seek to use narrative as a vehicle for accessing deeper truths of undigested personal experience (Gabriel, 2004). I attempted to seek deeper truths by maintaining a critical metacognitive stance throughout the reflective process. I am aware of the limitations of autobiographical research and my accounts presented in this study. To mitigate the limitations, I relied heavily on detailed journal entries, photographs, recollections of critical family members and peers and avoided interpretations, wherever possible. Other limitations such as the unreliability of memory/self-awareness, and the validity of memories are further discussed in the methodology chapter.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of this study’s rationale, research questions, methodology, personal ground, significance and limitations.

The following section reviews the literature on the topics of identity formation, the influence of gender, the complexities of the graphic medium, and graphic literacy.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of the literature draws upon three main strands relevant to my study. The first describes identity and becoming a teacher. The second describes the complexities of the graphic medium. Lastly, I focus on graphic literacy.

Identity and Becoming a Teacher

The current literature on identity and becoming a teacher has informed my understanding of the complexities of continuous identity development. To better understand the emergence of my teacher identity, the following section focuses on several main influences on one's identity development: development of identity; identity formation in relation to gender, race and class; influences on literate identity; and influences on teacher identity.

Development of Identity

Both identity formation and gender are critical influences on one's personality. Identity formation, or the process of individual personality development, occurs throughout life through many varied avenues such as the social, spiritual, sexual, cultural, academic, ethnic, and societal. Erikson (1950) postulated that for adolescents, forming an identity for oneself is the major ego development, with failure to do so resulting in identity diffusion. He understood ego identity as "the accrued confidence [in] the inner sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others" (p. 235). Young adults tend to draw on a range of relationships, practices, influences and experiences in the development of their identities (McLeod & Yates, 2006).

Identity formation is complex; McLeod and Yates (2006) explain that "identities are not simple, given, presumed essences that naturally unfold, but rather are produced in an ongoing process, mediated by multiple historical and contemporary factors" (p. 38). Everyday occurrences as well as life changing moments are all part of the process of shaping identity.

Within that process of shaping identity, Melucci (1996) believes that identity is “the product of our conscious action and the outcomes of self-reflection more than a set of given or inherited characteristics” (p. 31). Reflection is integral to ‘self-identity’, a term Giddens (1991) uses to mean “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (p. 53). I shall be using my own autobiography to better understand my own self-identity. Doing so will provide a better understanding of my identity as a literate being.

Wenger (1998) suggests that one’s identity does not lie only in the way one thinks or talks about oneself, or merely in the way others think or talk about one, but in the way one’s identity is lived day-to-day. Wenger notes that identities are formed amid the “tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts” (p. 188). He explains that identity formation is a dual process of identification and negotiation of meanings. He defines identification as investment of self in building associations and differentiations. We both identify, and are identified, as belonging to socially-organized categories and the lived experience of belonging to them. Tsui (2007) notes that identification is also participative, and “it is the lived experience of belonging that constitutes who we are. Therefore, identification is both rational and experiential” (p. 660). The way in which one lives day-to-day reveals a great deal about not only one’s lifestyle, but also about one’s values and priorities.

Below I focus on the role of gender, race and class in identity formation.

Identity Formation: Gender, race, and class.

Life experience, upbringing, social class, and gender also play a role in shaping identity, especially literate identity (Millard, 1997; Tsui, 2007). Gender is a cultural construct for differentiating between and among roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of

women and men in a given context, and the ways we construct gender has socio-economic implications (Sultana, 2011). Similarly, gender roles are the attitudes, behaviors, rights, and responsibilities that a society associates with each sex (Holt & Ellis, 1998). Prior to formal schooling, the family and community are the primary places where children construct gender identity; “in addition to the gendered messages they receive from parents, children observe gender at work in television, movies, books and illustrations” (Gosselin, 2007, p. 40). Millard (1997) found that even in the earliest stages of learning, children construe reading as a girl-appropriate activity. He notes that girls are more likely to be given literature as presents, to be portrayed as readers in children’s book illustrations, and to describe themselves as devoted to their books. Comics are a recognized form of literature. Below I discuss comic books and graphic novels.

Many educational researchers have suggested that comic books and graphic novels hold more appeal for boys (Chelton, 2006; Horton, 2005; Krashen, 2004). Moeller (2011) approached girls in an effort to persuade them to read graphic novels; and they would often respond with, “those are boy books,” (p. 477). Norton (2003) explored the “fantastic motivating power” of comic books for boys (p. 140) by attempting to “better understand the ubiquitous Archie reader and to determine if insights from Archie readers may have significance for literacy educators” (p. 140). Norton found that the pleasure boys derive from comics in general, and Archie comics in particular, is associated with a “sense of ownership of text. It is this sense of ownership that gives children the confidence to engage with comic books energetically and critically” (p. 145). Smith and Wilhelm (2002) observe that textbooks are ‘boring’ to boys because they do not have a story, and boys often prefer stories with action; they believe the best reading materials are “highly visual, or stimulated visual thinking” (p. 152).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2004) listed comic books as what “boys like to read” (p. 8) in their practical guide for teachers to help improve boys’ literacy skills. The guide notes that male students are easily frustrated when the reading level is too difficult, and are known for simply giving up or shutting down. The guide cites gender differences with respect to achievement by stating that “boys take longer to learn to read than girls do, boys read less than girls, [and] girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do” (p. 6). After analyzing this Ministry guide, Martino (2008) contends that it merely reifies “culturally validated versions of hegemonic masculinity through an erasure and active denial of ... gendered identity” (p. 91). He argues that the document is based on the essentialist notion of gender based in the belief that some essential and natural differences exist between boys and girls.

Hammett and Sanford (2008) deconstruct notions of gender, race and class. They highlight attempts to unpack several unsubstantiated conclusions to headlines proclaiming the demise of boys’ literacy. The authors remind readers that the issue is complex and that educators should be asking which boys (and which girls) appear to be doing poorly and what can be done to help them. Guzzetti (2008) notes that girls may also be “marginalized by their peers through asymmetrical discussions in subject areas, such as Language Arts” (p. 217); he suggests that girls “learn messages about gender roles and relations in classroom texts and talk about texts as well as in out-of-school texts” (p. 230). Millard (1997) describes the role that parents play in children’s developing literacy:

The crucial role that families play in the success of emergent literacy is now well documented Parents act as powerful models of literacy for their children, not only providing them with their first books and materials for writing, but also, in many cases, acting as their first teachers. (p. 4)

Racial identity and one's gender also play a key role in identity formation (Peterson, 2000). Peterson (2000) notes that both racial and 'womanist identity' are components in the development of personal identity; she explains how Caucasian women struggle to emerge from embeddedness in their self-definitions and regain their sense of identity. Hays and Chang (2003) explore the connection between 'White privilege' and oppression and recommend the use of racial identity models to address these constructs:

White privilege is the belief that only one's own standards and opinions are accurate (to the exclusion of all other standards and opinions) and that these standards and opinions are defined and supported by Whites in a way to continually reinforce social distance between groups, thereby allowing Whites to dominate, control access to, and escape challenges from racial and ethnic minorities. (p. 135)

In addition to the influences of race, Langston (1995) describes class as a critical factor in "how you think, feel, act, look, dress, talk, move, walk...class is the schools you attend, the education you attain; class is the very jobs you will work at throughout your adult life" (p. 102). Langston also notes that, "middle-class people have the privilege of choosing careers. They can decide which jobs they want to work, according to their moral or political commitments, needs for challenge or creativity" (p. 105). I explore the implications of privilege, due, in part, to my gender, race and class, in the Exegesis.

The following section discusses the many influences on one's literate identity.

Influences on Literate Identity

Sableski (2007) defines literate identity as "a blending of social identity with personal and social views of oneself as a reader and a writer" (p. 13). Students' identities are shaped and their subjectivities are expressed through the literacy practices that they engage in across settings (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010; Skinner & Hagood, 2008). The following section discusses several factors that influence one's literate identity: previous contexts and culture

(Sableski, 2007); community, home, school and teachers (Saleski, 2007; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010); and opportunities for in-school learning (Skinner & Hagood, 2008).

Sableski's (2007) investigated the influence of interactions between teachers and students on the identity development of students identified as struggling readers. Data were collected over a 6-month period and included close observation, interviews, work samples and transcripts of discussions. She found that students bring literate identities to academic interactions from previous contexts, and the extent to which their teachers honor these identities has implications for the development of their literate identities. Sableski describes how culture influences literate identity construction:

Culture is a set of norms and expectations negotiated by a group of people that success, or failure, to meet determines to which group a person belongs. These expectations shape identity. Culture constructs a person's literate identity by assigning a level of status based on ability to meet the norms and expectations of literate people in that particular culture, as demonstrated by written, oral, and nonverbal language abilities. (p. 8)

Along with culture as an influence on one's literate identity, Vasudevan, Schultz and Bateman (2010) assert that students' out-of-school literacy practices revolve across community, home, and school contexts; they describe literate identities and how these identities are constrained by traditional in-school literacy practices:

Students...are rarely invited to bring their out-of-school knowledge and interests into the classroom because it does not easily fit into the mandated daily lessons or the routinized modes of school participation. When and if youth are invited to draw on their out-of-school lives, they often do so within predetermined templates and primarily in written texts. In a time when academic success is predicated on test-taking and participation in a narrow range of literacy practices, there is also an increasingly narrow scope of literate or academic identities available for youth in school. Their sense of themselves as students and as literate is circumscribed by the restricted range of opportunities available to display their knowledge and to engage in meaningful participation in the classroom. (p. 446)

Although some researchers value community and home over schools as a primary basis for constructing literate identities, others, such as Sableski (2007), place value in the role of the teacher. Sableski notes that the "development of literate identity within academic contexts is

influenced by a variety of factors, one of which is the interactions between teachers and students,” (p. ii) and that it is “important that teachers are aware that the interactions they initiate impact students’ literate identities” (p. 332). In her research, she found that students’ processes of identity construction were linked to the interactions they had with their teachers – that there is a shifting of control from the teacher to the student throughout the learning process. She concluded that “through interaction with their teachers, students in this study became not only who they *are* in the social world, but also who they *might be*” (p. 326, emphasis in original).

In addition to the interactions between students and teachers, there are other various factors that can also contribute to one’s literate identity. Skinner and Hagood (2008) note that opportunities for learning such as the introduction of storytelling in various forms through personal narrative texts, journal writing, and more recently digital storytelling provide opportunities for youth to develop and display different literate identities.

Phillips and Larson (2009) argue that preservice teachers who enter teacher education programs with an existing identity as a literate person, as someone who uses literacy to enrich his/her personal life as well as a way to connect with others, will find that their literate identity will help facilitate their engagement in the world and help to further their identity development. They discuss how students’ can explore their own literate identity:

The pedagogies of comprehensive literacy [are] a means to facilitate students’ engagement in the world as literate beings involved in personal meaning making. The pedagogies of comprehensive literacy become an extension of a personal discourse of literacy as transactional and help define each student’s identity as a literate person who explores and inquires through generative, receptive, personal and social processes. (p. 144)

As discussed above, key influences that shape literate identity include: previous contexts and culture; community, home, school and teachers; and opportunities for in-school learning.

The following section discusses many influences that contribute to teacher identity.

Influences on Teacher Identity

Every experience shapes one's identity, and every aspect of this identity shapes a teacher's identity as an educator (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Borg, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Grossman et al., 2000; Harste et al., 2004; Phillips & Larson, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Understanding one's own identity as a teacher, and the path that shaped that identity, may allow for a better understanding of one's teaching philosophy and purpose as a teacher. Mayer (1999) explains that becoming a teacher goes beyond simply being appointed to the role of a teacher or obtaining knowledge and skills to execute the functions of a teacher; rather, it is also about developing a sense of self-identity and purpose. There are many complexities involved in gaining membership into the culture of teaching and developing a professional identity (Alsup, 2006; Antonek, McCormick, & Donato, 1997; Britzman, 1991; Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1991). These complexities contribute to the many factors that influence one's teacher identity.

Factors that can influence the development of one's teacher identity include: beliefs and perceptions of self (Borg, 2003; Olsen, 2008); prior knowledge (Aquino, 2012; Grow, 2011); teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005; Kosnik & Beck, 2009); influences within teacher education programs/field experience (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al, 2005; Volante & Earl, 2002); gender (Dolan, 1996; Gosselin, 2007; Velez-Rendon, 2010); and social class/race (Dolan, 1996; Malewski & Phillion, 2008; Morris, 2005).

The first factor that can influence the development of one's teacher identity is belief and perceptions of self. Olsen (2008) explains that teacher development is "circular even as it is also forward-moving: a teacher is always collapsing the past, present, and future into a complex *mélange* of professional beliefs, goals, memories and predictions while enacting practice" (p. 24). He explores teachers' reasons for entry into the profession and how their beliefs illuminate

teacher identity development. He also considers how teachers rely on embedded understandings *of and for* themselves as teachers, which derive from personal and prior beliefs and experiences, as well as perceptions of self. Borg (2003) argues that in order to better understand teachers, researchers need to study the psychological processes through which teachers make sense of their work. Borg notes that his focus on cognitive processes was a major departure from the views of teachers and teaching that were dominant at the time of his study. He contends that teaching should no longer be viewed merely in terms of behaviours, but rather as thoughtful behaviour. He argues that teachers should not be considered transmitters of factual information, but as active, thinking decision-makers; decision-makers whose past experiences guide and shape their thoughtful behaviour.

Along with beliefs and perceptions of self, prior knowledge also contributes to one's teacher identity. Grow (2011) investigated prior knowledge of preservice teachers of literacy and how their knowledge related to their identity development through a multiple case study of three preservice teachers. Grow discovered that prior knowledge as a component of identity served to help preservice teachers author themselves in regard to their interactions with their cooperating teachers, students, and with the classroom and school environment. In addition, preservice teachers relied on their prior knowledge to notice, critique, and anticipate, which led to further development of their identity as teachers of literacy in a circular manner. Grow notes that constructing a teacher identity is a process that may be regarded as continuous professional growth that is collaborative and multi-faceted, as prior circumstances are resolved and new insights and challenges revitalize and empower our learning.

Aquino (2012) explored literacy and learning beliefs preservice teachers had upon entering a teacher education program, how their beliefs change over time and the influences on

their beliefs. Aquino found that “preservice teachers experienced many changes in their beliefs about teaching language arts and literacy, including changes to philosophy; pedagogy; perceptions of students; and perceptions of themselves” (p. 190). She notes that preservice teachers need opportunities to examine their entering beliefs, as well as the “evolution of their beliefs, and ultimately, their conceptions of what it means to be a teacher,” (p. 194) and that accessing this information and reflecting on a metacognitive level will “enable them to develop a professional identity that includes all the knowledge and skills that characterize multi-faceted teacher-knowledge” (p. 194).

In addition to perceptions of self and prior knowledge, teacher education programs are imperative to the development of one’s teacher identity (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005; Kosnik & Beck, 2009). Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) examine central issues in teacher education curriculum and program design, and explore features of programs that appear to support teacher learning and development. They assert that although there is no single best way to organize teachers’ learning experiences in a teacher education program, there are considerations and strategies to draw upon including content, coherence and connections. In addition to their belief that content of the curriculum is an important factor in the effectiveness of a program, they note the importance of a coherent program that consists of a collection of related courses with a common conception of teaching and learning, as well as a connection between theory and practice during field placement. They also discuss teacher educators’ emphasis on the interrelationships between teachers’ *learning and development* and the *context of teachers’ learning*; in turn, teacher educators are beginning to focus upon the particular features of contexts and experiences that might help teachers develop their capabilities.

Kosnik and Beck (2009) found that one thing preservice teachers appreciated about their

teacher education programs was the guidance and assistance they received in developing a vision for and philosophy of teaching. The researchers recommend preservice teachers “should be encouraged to develop a vision that is tailored to their distinctive needs, talents, circumstances, outlook, while also meeting the needs of their students” (p. 166).

In addition to teacher education programs’ structure and effectiveness, field experience is a main contributor to the development of teacher identity (Darling-Hammond et al, 2005).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) note that it appears to be critical to help preservice teachers link theoretical principals to contextualized events. In a sense, students need to learn cases within a “schema of the field” (p. 433) to see how to represent and relate to knowledge about teaching, learning and development in order for an effective and rich learning experience to take place. They identify four purposes for field placement: a) to make connections between theory and practice; b) to construct a curriculum that is meaningful and developmentally appropriate; c) to model best practices; and d) to assess student learning in effective ways. The researchers note, “when teachers have multiple opportunities to experience and study the relationship of theory and practice, their learning is enhanced” (p. 401). Beck and Kosnick (2002) note that the practicum component of teacher education is highly valued by teacher candidates. They assert that a successful practicum placement should involve a peer relationship with a cooperating teacher, a moderate degree of collaboration with a cooperating teacher, a sound model of teaching and learning from a cooperating teacher, and some flexibility in teacher components (classroom management, time management, etc.).

Just as field placement contributes to one’s beliefs about teaching (which contributes to one’s teacher identity), teacher educators and associate teachers also play a role in the development of one’s teacher identity. Volante and Earl’s (2002) studied 47 teacher candidates’

understandings of the conceptual orientations that defined their preservice program and practicum experience to determine the dominant perspectives of teacher candidates. The study focused on an alternative teacher education program with a focus on school, community, and global connections. It used interviews, focus groups, and observations to address how teacher candidates characterized the program, the influence of the program on students' professional development, and the factors that influenced student's ability to adhere to their educational philosophy within their schools. Some teacher candidates discussed the importance of having a supportive associate teacher who accepted the key ideas of their preservice program, and all teacher candidates cited an unsupportive associate teacher as a constraining factor to a successful practicum experience. One participant explained his/her disappointing experience with an associate teacher: "I couldn't do the kind of teaching that I wanted to do. The people I was working with were nice but they weren't aware of the impact that some of the[ir] comments might have on students" (p. 432). Volante and Earl (2002) found that a majority of teacher candidates typically reported resistance from their associate teachers, and that a tension formed between teacher candidates and associate teachers because teacher candidates were often expected to adopt the teacher style of their associate teacher. They concluded that teacher educators need to provide teacher candidates with strategies on how to retain or negotiate teaching approaches that may not be endorsed by their associate teachers, and that teacher educators should examine the expectations they place on their students to avoid setting them up for failure or disillusionment about the profession.

Chant, Heafner and Bennet (2004) investigated 14 preservice elementary teachers' reflections on their education during their teacher education program using action research. In their study, they note several examples of preservice teachers' disappointment in

their experience. When asked to describe how the preservice teachers felt during the course part of their program; one candidate commented: “I realize that I will not be happy nor will I be an effective teacher if I do not take my theories into consideration and practice them in the classroom” (p. 36). This candidate felt there was a lack of alignment between the theories being addressed and the realities of the classroom. Another candidate discussed the required assignments: “[they] made me think more about my personal beliefs about teaching and it disturbed me to see that my observations were not reflected in the things that I feel are important to incorporate into the classroom” (p. 36). In contrast, when given the opportunity to discuss their personal practical theory (PPT) with a principal, one participant was delighted with the feedback: “He was very impressed that I clearly stated my beliefs. He also commented on my research” (p. 36). Another participant added: “The principal who interviewed me read my entire PPTs. Can you believe that? She kept asking me questions about my PPTs. It was a great way to tell her about what I believe” (p. 36). Chant, Heafner and Bennet (2004) concluded that although some participants struggled with the expectations of the program, most participants expressed that being reflective practitioners interested in improving practice was integral to their future teaching success. They also found that several participants were successful at generating a baseline understanding of their practice through personal theorizing, and were able to develop action research related to their teaching. Although preservice teachers may have diverse opinions regarding teacher education programs, all experiences, both positive and negative, contribute to one’s teacher identity because they influence teachers’ changing beliefs (Aquino, 2012).

There is much research on the effects of social categories such as gender, social class, and race on teachers’ perceptions of their practice (Dolan, 1996; Kyle, 1997; Louis & Smith, 1990; Malewski & Phillion, 2008; Morris, 2005). Individuals’ normative views of gender

identities are constructed and negotiated through discourse (Pavlenko, 2004). Discourse, interaction and communication are all aspects of one's teacher identity, an identity that gender undoubtedly influences (Velez-Rendon, 2010). Our gender identity is constituted within the language we employ and in the kinds of social interactions in which we engage (Gosselin, 2007). The discourse, social interaction, and language we employ as teachers is constantly evolving and developing, which in turn, evolves and develops our teacher identity. Therefore gender contributes to the critical dimension of developing an identity as a teacher.

Social class and race also contribute to teachers' perceptions of their practice (Malewski & Phillion, 2008; Morris, 2005). In regards to teachers' perceptions, Morris (2005) asserts that class and race are often interrelated in complex ways that "tend to defy a clear division" (p. 100). Langston (1995) describes class as one's "understanding of the world and where you fit in; it's composed of ideas, behavior, attitudes, values, and language....class is socially constructed and all-encompassing" (p. 102). According to racial identity models, race is a social rather than a biological construct, (Cameron & Wycoff, 1998; Helms, 1995) and racial identity refers to a person's psychological orientation to race and is an important aspect of one's identity (Jones & Carter, 1996). By these standards, each individual teacher has different ideas, behaviors, attitudes and values regarding their own class and racial construct, as well as their students' classes and racial constructs. Similarly, Morris (2005) asserts that the social position one holds or attempts to project does not always directly correspond to the social position that others interpret.

In his study, Morris (2005) explored how teachers perceived and interacted with white students in a predominately ethnic minority school. Based on ethnographic data of a Texan school over two years, Morris found that different teachers expressed different views of the family and class backgrounds of white students. These views of class stemmed from how

teachers interpreted the whiteness of students in this predominately minority context and influenced how they reacted to these students academically. He notes, “the black teachers typically saw the white students as middle class and good students, whereas the white teachers tended to view the students as low income and unremarkable students” (p. 100). He argues that teachers’ perceptions of students related to race and class have been shown to influence teacher-student interactions, which can affect grades, ability-group placement, and test scores.

Malewski and Phillion (2008) explored ways class, gender, and race complicate perceptions and experiences of 39 preservice teachers during international field experience. Data were collected over five years through observation, group discussion and interviews and their research suggests that multicultural theories of race, class, and gender provide important analytic tools for understanding the diversity of experiences preservice teachers have. The study found that through course discussions on the implications of minority and majority status for classroom teaching, preservice teachers expressed a newfound “wide-awakeness” about the ways societies attached differential value to various cultural styles and intellects. The authors discuss the importance for preservice teachers to take into account race, gender and class in order to explore different types of perspectives:

By taking into account race, gender, and class, it is possible to more fully engage the perspectives of preservice teachers both personally and professionally. Although negative experiences and unintended outcomes will not be entirely eliminated, providing opportunities to explore the significance of different types of perspectives might add to the depth and complexity of cross-cultural experiences and better prepare preservice teachers to be globally engaged educators (p. 58).

They conclude by stating that it seems “imperative that education scholars account for how race, class, and gender are constructed by other cultures, made meaning of by preservice teachers, and shape perceptions of students” (p. 58). Recognizing and understanding the many influences to one’s own identity as a teacher may allow for a better understanding of one’s teaching

philosophy and purpose as a teacher.

Above, I noted the many factors that can influence the development of one's teacher identity, which included: beliefs and perceptions of self; prior knowledge; teacher education programs; influences within teacher education programs/field experience; gender; and social class/race. The following section describes the intricacies of the medium and the dynamics of comic elements.

The Complexities of the Graphic Medium

Similar to the benefits of understanding many complexities of identity development, there are many intricacies of the graphic medium that are worth exploring. In this section I explore the comic medium and the dynamics of comic elements in order to provide background information to readers about both graphic literacies and my autobiographical graphic novella.

Understanding the Medium

McCloud (1993) defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). McCloud's work is widely known in the world of comics: From the perspectives of writer, illustrator and theorist in *Understanding Comics* (1993), he articulates and describes many aspects of the comics medium. McCloud redefines the term “comics” as it “refers to the medium itself, not a specific object as ‘comic book’ or ‘comic strip’ do” (p. 4). Seyfried (2008) observes that throughout McCloud's (1993) work, he “outlines a theory of comics as an art form and a mode of storytelling while modeling them in his drawings” (p. 46). For my graphic novella, I drew from McCloud's use of narrator by using myself as a character and speaking directly to the reader while storytelling. In relation to McCloud's (1993) definition, Gorman (2003), following McCloud's theorizing, describes a comic as “a fusion of images and words that form a cohesive

narrative told in a frame-by-frame format” (p. 1). However, comics should be distinguished from those found in the optimistically named “funny pages”, which usually do not follow a storyline that includes a definitive conclusion.

Moving one step beyond a comic/comic books, Eisner (1996) coined the term “graphic novel” as a compilation of several comic books or an extended comic book that follows a complete story arc. Wolk (2007) distinguishes between comics as a *medium* and the notion of genre:

As cartoonists and their longtime admirers are getting a little tired of explaining, comics are not a genre; they’re a medium. Westerns, Regency romances, film noir: those are genres – kinds of stories with specific categories of subjects and conventions for their content and presentation. (Stories about superheroes are a genre, too.) Prose fiction, sculpture, video: those, like comics, are a media (*sic*)– forms of expression that have few or no rules regarding their content other than the very broad ones imposed on them by their form. (p. 11)

Jacobs (2007), whose ideas have been influenced by McCloud’s analysis of visual literacy, argues that, historically, comics have been viewed as a “debased or simplified word-based literacy” (p. 1). In contrast, he considers comics to be multifaceted, multimodal texts, and explains that, “by embracing the idea of multimodal literacy in relation to comics, then, we can help students engage critically with ways of making meaning that exist all around them” (p. 21). Consistent with Jacobs’ view of comics as multimodal, Carter (2007) notes that “graphic novels, after all, are the perfect blend of word and picture, story as text and story as art. As such, they offer important, unique, and timely multiliteracy experiences” (p. 7).

Comic Elements and Dynamics

Comic elements include frame, panels, imagery, character development, expressive anatomy, lettering, storytelling, props, visual iconography, word-picture dynamics, time and motion, closure, line styles, colouring, and symbols, to name a few. Understanding each element

and how each element interacts with others to create multimodal meaning on a page is an important step to understanding why reading graphic literacy is beneficial. Artists/writers make hundreds of choices in order to create the perfect melding of image and text to convey their message. Seyfried (2008) explains, “according to McCloud, every graphic novelist must make certain decisions when creating a page (or more) of panels” (p. 46).

In each panel, some of the decisions illustrators and writers must make include panel layout and choice, lettering, frame format, visual style, cropping, visual and frame devices, sound effects, speech bubbles, captions, landscape, transitions, and most importantly, placement of the ‘gutter’. McCloud (1993) argues that the gutter space in between two panels, “despite the unceremonious title, plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics! Here in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (p. 66). Jacobs (2007) explains that,

readers must fill in the blanks within these gutters and make connections between panels. Images of people, objects, animals, and settings, word balloons, lettering, sound effects, and gutters all come together to form page layouts that work to create meaning in distinctive ways and in multiple realms of meaning making. (p. 21)

Through each gutter, readers must create meaning to help inform them of the happenings within the text. By this understanding, many picture books offer similar uses of gutter that make them complex texts. With both picture books and graphic works, many readers, especially new ones, might not be able to fully comprehend the words themselves, but through the accompanying images, they are able to fit the story together like a puzzle. Parents and teachers can use comics in developing proficiency in readers (Callahan, 2009; Seyfried, 2008). Once students are able to read and comprehend complex text, they gain the self-esteem needed to continue to read other works. MacDonald (2010) asserts that “if pupils can read proficiently, this allows them to access the curriculum in all subjects and helps them to become confident, successful, motivated

learners” (p. 15). Jacobs also argues that by teaching students to become “conscious and critical of the ways in which they make meaning from multimodal texts such as comics, we can also teach students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts” (p. 24).

McCloud (1993) explains that there are several different panel-to-panel transitions that can be used to help “unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the invisible art of comics storytelling” (p. 74): moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect, and non sequitur. He notes, “the idea that a picture can evoke an *emotional* or *sensual response* in the viewer is vital to the art of comics.... The invisible world of senses and emotions can also be portrayed either *between* or *within* panels” (p. 121, emphasis in original).

Readers must become familiar with navigating through comic pages and panels, and time and space, to become comfortable with the form; once they do, the possibilities for understanding are greatly increased. Eisner (1996) suggests that “time” or the phenomenon of duration and its experience is integral to sequential art: “In the universe of human consciousness time combines with space and sound in a setting of interdependence wherein conceptions, actions, motions and movement have a meaning and are measured by our perceptions of their relationship to each other” (p. 23). He also argues that comics readers are not only reading the words on the page, but they are “reading” every aspect of the image, from human posture and expression, to panel framing, to image placement and lettering. Therefore, comics have the potential to help students make meaning from what they read *and* see, which is an important aspect in the development of reading proficiency and literacy skills (Callahan, 2009; Frey & Fisher, 2008).

Now that I have explored the complexities of the graphic medium and the dynamics of

comic elements, I discuss graphic medium's place in education, and the benefits graphic literacy can have to students.

Graphic Literacy

Graphic literacy has the potential to benefit all students in terms of comprehension, critical reading and thinking skills, and making meaning through multimodalities. Before discussing the benefits, I explore the importance of graphic literacy to education.

Why Graphic Literacy is Important to Education

In this section, I address why scholars and authors believe graphic literacy can be helpful and beneficial to students' literacy education, and why its implementation might be crucial for adolescents. Edwards (2009) explains why parents and teachers have reason to be alarmed about students reading for pleasure in light of the electronic media to which they have access:

Students are not reading for pleasure as frequently as they formerly have, due to the influx of video games, cell phones, MP3 players, and other electronic devices....The amount of reading and motivation to read may be reaching an all-time low that could result in a reading crisis of epidemic proportion. (p. 56)

Assuming Edwards' (2009) concern to be valid, it is necessary to begin thinking of new and innovative ways to promote literacy in the classroom. Edwards (2009) found that middle school students were freely choosing to read graphic novels (narrative works in which the story is conveyed to the reader using the comics form, through the use of sequential illustrations) and will read graphic novels when they will not read anything else. A number of researchers have documented students' improvement in vocabulary development, comprehension, and motivation towards reading when students participate in free voluntary reading (Krashen, 2004; Shin, 1998). Seyfried (2008) contends that "the revitalized genre has not only saved the day for recreational reading, it has also turned out to be a heavyweight in the teaching of advanced themes in literature and visual literacy" (p. 45).

There are several areas in which students may academically benefit from reading graphic literature: engagement (McVicker, 2007); vocabulary (Seyfried, 2008); communication and meaning-making (Jacobs, 2007); and using graphic novels as a ‘gateway’ into traditional literature (Callahan, 2009).

McVicker (2007) argues that comics are one way to make learning more engaging for students, and that struggling readers, often unengaged with literacy in general, would benefit from a reading intervention. She notes “comics help motivate disengaged readers, offering an ingenious hook to reading that can ultimately bridge their literacy interests to more conventional text structures” (p. 86). She also believes that comics “are one way to make teaching different,” (p. 85) and that the “ever-increasing use of technology in virtually every aspect of life legitimizes visual literacy’s place on the list of language arts” (p. 88).

In regards to vocabulary, Seyfried (2008) explains that “students crave stories that they can relate to, written in a language they can understand, with jokes they can get, and metaphors that are clear to them” (p. 47). He notes that graphic literacy provides students “with a rich and rewarding literacy experience at a time when the duration, vocabulary, and style of prose masterpieces cannot” (p. 47). McVicker (2007) notes that by reading graphic literature, “the acquisition of sight words and phonics skills and the building of vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies are fostered in developing readers” (p. 86).

Jacobs (2007) argues that meaning is constructed in ways that are increasingly multimodal – in which “written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (p. 21). He believes that students might have an easier time understanding the communication that occurs in comics because the “combination of words and images works to create meaning in very particular and distinctive ways; in a multimodal text,

meaning is created through print, visuals, and the combination of the two in order to achieve effects and meanings that would not be possible in either a strictly print or strictly visual text” (p. 182). He also notes that the benefit of word-based literacy instruction is strengthened through the inclusion of visual and other literacies.

Callahan (2009) explores the perceptions and use of graphic novels in the classroom, and discusses the resources available for teachers to integrate graphic novels into the curriculum, including “combining graphic novels with traditional literature to promote discussion and critical thinking” (p. 35). She found that for struggling and reluctant readers, graphic novels and other non-traditional texts are becoming more popular in educational settings.

Although there are many areas in which students may academically benefit from reading graphic literature, it first requires classroom implementation. The potential benefits of using multimodal texts such as comics in the classroom depend on teachers’ willingness to implement them. Carter (2008) observes,

it is possible that teachers simply do not know enough about comics-related research and visualization as a literacy skill. It is also possible that many teachers don’t possess a schema that connects “comic books” to “graphic novels” with learning. If lack of knowledge is not the culprit, perhaps there is still fallout from Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), which suggested a correlation between reading comics and an increase in adolescent violence and maladjustment, but this seems unlikely. (p. 49)

Librarians appear to be the one of the strongest groups of graphic novel advocates (Gorman, 2003). The best way to promote graphic literacy in the classroom is to educate and inform teachers of the multimodality of comics, and the benefits to student literacy (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2008). Jacobs (2007) contends that

by engaging with comics as multimodal texts and sites/sponsors of multimodal literacy, we as educators can both avail ourselves of another context for understanding how multimodal texts and multimodal literacies operate and, more importantly, use this knowledge to advance the ways in which we address multimodality in our classrooms.” (p. 201)

The above section has discussed the importance of graphic literacy to education by exploring such benefits as engagement, vocabulary, communication and meaning-making. Below, I discuss comprehension, multimodality and students' critical reading/thinking skills, in relation to comics.

Comprehension, Multimodalities, and Critical Reading/Thinking

Reading comics engages students in the development of reading, comprehension, multimodal reading, and critical reading/thinking skills. I explain these components below.

Comprehension. Reading comprehension, as a cognitive skill or ability, has been studied by cognitive psychologists, curriculum theorists, and educational theorists alike (Sventina, Gorin, & Tatsuoka, 2011). Reading receives a great amount of attention in schools because students require skills in reading comprehension to access information and concepts in various curriculum areas (Brown-Chidsey, Davis, & Maya, 2003). Thus, students who display poor reading skills are more likely to experience difficulties in other academic areas (Espin & Deno, 1993).

In order to better understand how graphic literacy strengthens reading comprehension, we must first understand the act of reading. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that the act of reading involves a transaction between the reader and the text; each transaction is a unique experience in which the reader and text constantly act and are acted upon by each other. A written work does not have the same meaning for everyone as each reader brings individual background knowledge, beliefs, and context to the reading act: "the reader of any text must actively draw upon past experience and call forth the 'meaning' from the coded symbols" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 22). Rosenblatt also distinguishes between different kinds of reading, and placed all reading transactions on a continuum between *aesthetic* (reading to engage and interpret), and *effereent* (reading to extract information). She argues that the meaning of any text is not in the work itself but in the reader's

interaction with it. Interaction and meaning-making are an important aspect of reading, and comprehension hinges on a student's ability to effectively aesthetically read. Reading aesthetically can have many benefits for students because the challenge that students encounter when perceiving, constructing and sharing their aesthetic representations enrich their understandings of reading comprehension in ways traditional types of assignments would not (Cuero, 2008). Jacobs (2007) explains that since it is aesthetic reading that contributes to students' ability to make meaning from text, it is aesthetic reading in which students engage while reading graphic texts, or *multimodal* literacy.

White (2011) asserts that “graphic novels offer a great way to bolster reading comprehension and general academic achievement for students” (p. 20) because “graphic novels do more than just present a visual representation of text. The pictures in a graphic novel provide contextual support to the text information and without them the story wouldn't be complete” (p. 21). White discusses the transferability of skills acquired when reading graphic literature:

It is crucial to note, as well, that reading and comprehending graphic novels requires the use of many of the same skills that are needed to understand traditional works of prose fiction. Thus, the skills developed through reading and understanding information presented in the graphic novel format translate readily to the reading of non-graphic texts. (p. 25)

Multimodalities. ‘Multimodalities’ refer to “the sign systems that humans use to create meaning” (Courtland, 2010, p. 334). Within sign systems such as digital literacies, media, arts, poetry, and graphic literacy, there exist particular signs that are used to make meaning (Courtland, 2010). Cope and Kalantzis (2000) explain that “meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal – in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (p. 5). Multimodal reading, or having more than one way of making meaning from visual, audio, or spatial patterns, is especially important to

students who are beginning readers. We, as humans, “read” everything around us, from images on billboards to menus to traffic signs to newspapers, to body language and expression. We constantly pick up visual cues and social interactions and “read” them by taking meaning away from them. Students who engage in reading comics may construct meaning from the images alone, from the text alone, and/or from the text and image combined.

Carter (2007) explains that customarily, visual literacy has been “tied to the fields of graphic design, art, and art history, but, over the last few decades, visual literacy, cultural literacy, and critical literacy have become more and more intertwined” (p. 12). The more we intertwine critical thinking and multimodal reading, the better readers students will be, in every sense of the word. Jacobs (2007) argues for the effectiveness of graphic literacy for skill building:

Situating our thinking about comics, literacy, and education within a framework that views literacy as occurring in multiple modes, we can use comics to greater effectiveness in our teaching at all levels by helping us to arm students with the critical-literacy skills they need to negotiate diverse systems of meaning making. (p. 21)

Jacobs also believes that the skills acquired from reading comics will transfer to all other areas of “reading”: “By teaching students to become conscious and critical of the ways in which they make meaning from multimodal texts such as comics, we can also teach students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts” (p. 24). Kress (2004) observes that “words are (relatively) vague, often nearly empty of meaning; by contrast images are full, ‘plain’ with meaning. With image the placement of the depicted entities relative to one another in the image-space is the principle used for making meaning” (p. 112). Moss (2003) also notes that “multimodality expands the analytic object beyond the written word” (p. 78). Multimodal text thus provides the possibility for greater meaning making, which can strengthen a reader’s ability to find meaning.

McCloud (1993) contends that multimodality utilizes both text and image to their full potential:

When pictures carry the weight of clarity in a scene, they free words to explore a wider area.... When a scene shows you all you “need” to know...the latitude for scripting grows enormously.... On the other hand, if the words lock in the “meaning” of a sequence, then the pictures can really take off. (pp. 157-159)

By focusing on the meaning of a sequence while reading graphic texts, students are using their aesthetic reading skills to better understand what is being communicated. Frey and Fisher (2008) explain that a fundamental goal of education is to teach effective communication, be it verbal, written, or pictorial; and the challenge to any communicator is to create accurate messages and interpret the messages of others with equal skill. Mixing verbal, written and pictorial comprehension by studying and discussing graphic literacy can not only strengthen students’ multimodal reading skills, but also bolster their critical thinking abilities (Edwards, 2009).

Critical literacy/thinking skills. Critical thinking is one of, if not *the*, most important skill that students should have (Robertson & Rane-Szostak, 1996). Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) reviewed a range of definitions for critical literacy and synthesized it into four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace; interrogating multiple viewpoints; focusing on sociopolitical issues; and taking action and promoting social justice. Brookfield (1987) describes the chief components of the concept of critical thinking as: “identifying and challenging assumptions,” and “exploring and imagining alternatives” (p. 15); understanding the importance of context; and engaging in reflective skepticism. The development of critical thinking is necessary for students’ analysis of unfamiliar situations, “so that their question-asking, problem-solving, and decision-making capabilities will be based on a framework of rational thinking” (Miri, Ben-Chaim & Zoller, 2007, p. 354).

Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002) conducted a study that explored the implementation

of critical literacy through thirteen teachers' experiences (six "newcomers" to critical literacy, five novice and two experienced teachers). They encouraged the teachers to promote exploratory and collaborative conversations of texts, emphasize social issue books, and interrogate text by asking open-ended questions with multiple and contradictory perspectives. They found that when teachers consciously implemented critical literacy, students moved "beyond personal connections" and were challenged to "better understand the ways in which larger sociopolitical structures position people in the world" (p. 391). They also discovered that the synthesized four dimension of critical literacy provided a "framework for examining teacher beliefs and practices to distinguish the varied ways in which teacher conceptualize and enacted critical literacy" (p. 391). Versaci (2001) argues that comic books help develop much needed analytical and critical thinking skills.

Through visual literacy, students make choices based on their readings, and take information and channel it through different modes (Callahan, 2009). Once students become fluent in graphic novel reading they can "learn that rereading and slow reading support close observation, a necessary skill of visual literacy" (Seyfried, 2008, p. 47). Close observation can strengthen critical thinking, as do discussions about the choices the writer/illustrator made within the work. For students learning English as a second language, highly visual texts such as graphic novels have been shown to be *especially* effective for increasing reading comprehension (Ranker, 2007). Ranker (2007) elaborates: "Ms. Stephen's use of comics as read-alouds in her English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom fits with a growing body of research that has specifically explored the possibilities of using comics and graphic novels in learning to read and write in school" (p. 296).

For English Language Learners, as well as all students, visual texts help bridge the gap

for the students who are not quite ready to make the move to novels (Ranker, 2007). When students first begin to read, they begin with picture books. The integration of text and images makes reading and comprehension easier. This concept transfers to older students; they become engaged with graphic texts because they can see what is happening and become invested in the story (Ranker, 2007). At the same time, graphic texts promote reading and enable learners to develop many additional skills. McVicker (2007) argues that “using comics for instruction is a quick, concise way to teach, practice, and apply reading skills whether it is for initial instruction or remediation of reading difficulties” (p. 86). Also, when reading, students learn writing skills that are transferrable. Callahan (2009) found that “graphic novels can also be beneficial to writing instruction. When students read graphic novels, they become familiar with tone, mood and especially dialogue techniques, which can be transferred to their own writing” (p. 14).

In terms of comprehension, Edwards (2009) argues that “reading a graphic novel requires the reader to infer and construct meaning from the visual representations while using the text to develop not only meaning but to foster comprehension” (p. 56). McVicker (2007) notes that comic images enhance and extend text communication by attracting the attention of the reader, and fostering understanding of the unknown factors in the text’s language. While word recognition is important, understanding words in context and comprehension of a storyline is crucial to the development of any literate student. Once students begin to comprehend text, they can begin to develop and reinforce their critical thinking skills (Edwards, 2009; McVicker, 2007). Graphic literacy can be used to help strengthen students understanding of multimodal text, develop essential critical thinking skills, and help to “transform students’ vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills” (Carter, 2007, p. 49). Carter (2007) also discusses the importance of graphic texts within the classroom, as well as how to utilize graphic literacy.

Carter (2007) states that it is important to “teach the future teachers how to read these forms of sequential art narrative so that they too can use comics and graphic novels to expand their students’ literacy skills” (p. 49). He recommends using response groups in the form of a writing workshop, that help students “develop a metacognitive sense of the creative enterprise as a whole, while enjoying the opportunity to create an authentic text, a true student classic of sequential art” (p. 152). Chandler-Olcott (2008) notes that literature circles (small, student-led groups discussing literary texts) may be used to explore the wide range of genres and topics related to Japanese graphic animation known as ‘anime’. Daniels (1994) explains that the power of literature circles derives from the way they accommodate student choice, promote collaborative talk, and make students’ meaning-making strategies visible to each other. Both response groups and literature circles can be used in a variety of ways when teaching with graphic novels. Park (2010) suggests that teachers could also encourage students to create their own comics and graphic novels. He believes that this activity “ties in very well with the stated goals of many English curricula to include representation and viewing in the language activities of the classroom” (p. 180). I explore how I would implement a social constructivist reader response approach to the implementation of graphic literacy in the Exegesis.

The above section has discussed the importance of the development of critical thinking for students’ connection-building, comprehension, visual literacy, and meaning-making skills.

Summary

This chapter presented literatures related to the development of identity formation, the graphic medium and graphic literacy. It also described the complexities and influences on teacher identity, comic elements, and why graphic literacy is important to education. The following chapter describes the methodology surrounding my autobiographical graphic novella.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by defining the terms used in my autobiographical research. The purpose of the study was to explore my research questions and to illuminate my emerging identities as a literate person and as a beginning teacher, through a graphic autobiography; it sought to combine the power of autobiographical reflection with the power of graphic representation to explore my own identity. This chapter, then, describes the role of the researcher, methodology, data collection, materials used, data analysis, presentation of the findings, and issues related to credibility and trustworthiness.

Defining Autobiography

There are many terms and definitions used to describe autobiographical research such as *autobiography* (Demetrio, 2007), *biography* (Butt & Raymond, 1987), *personal narrative* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), *self-study* (Wilcox, 2009), and *teacher lore* (Schubert, 1991). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) define autobiography as a form of self-study research using reflection and personal narrative. My study is an autobiographical graphic novella in which I combine the methods of autobiography and narrative. My *graphic* autobiography extends the autobiographical form through image and text by means of paneled pages.

Autobiography can potentially be a meaningful expression of an individual's life experience that can deeply affect the readers who can relate to the writer on a basic human level, regardless of the specific subject matter. Demetrio (2007) defines *autobiography* as "written and oral stories [that] disclose what [individuals'] feel inside" (p. 2151). Demetrio explains that "almost a century ago the human sciences discovered that collecting life stories was necessary for shedding light on circumstances" and for "penetrating more deeply into the explanation of events" (p. 251). Through the process of writing an autobiographical piece, the writer must

reflect on past situations, circumstances, and outcomes, and in this process, can gain a better understanding of past events. Through the process of reading an autobiographical piece, the reader can gain a better understanding of the writer's life, as well as a better understanding of his/her own life by relating to the writer's basic human experiences. Demetrio notes that "people who regularly put down their own experiences, emotions and thoughts on paper, and acquire a habit of self-reflection, can act with greater deliberation and self-control and pay more attention to the needs of others" (p. 252).

Butt and Raymond (1987) define *biography* as "a disciplined way of interpreting a person's thought and action in the light of his or her past," (p. 63) and note that "a teacher's autobiography conveys how teachers' knowledge is held, formed, and how it can be studied and understood" (Butt & Raymond, 1988, p. 120).

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) define *personal narrative* as "the making of meaning from personal experience via a process of reflection in which storytelling is a key element and in which metaphors and folk knowledge take their place" (p. 16). Connelly and Clandinin (1987) also discuss the difference between autobiography and narrative:

The emphasis on personal knowledge of classrooms highlights one of the principal differences between narrative and biography. The primary focus in [a teacher's] autobiography and biography...is on method...The purpose of method is to reveal something about individual persons...In contrast, the emphasis in narrative, at least as defined in the study of personal practical knowledge, is on how people know classrooms. Method is subsidiary. (p. 136)

They further note that narrative accounts portray how teachers come to understand their lives in classrooms. They suggest that teachers work and struggle to achieve meaning and understanding; teachers labor to make sense of their worlds.

Wilcox (2009) defines *self-study* as "a process of examining our beliefs and actions and exploring questions of practice that arise in particular contexts," (p. 123) and may also "help us

to gain a deeper understanding of what is involved in the transformations we say we desire” (p. 125). Wilcox asserts that self-study typically “serves as a starting point for further development, a place from which we can identify what is needed to improve in particular contexts,” and that it “incorporates – yet takes beyond – reflective practice” (p. 125). Wilcox also notes “self-study is a marvelous way to respond positively to the things that take us by surprise, allowing us to turn disorienting dilemmas of practice into positive prompts for transformative learning” (p. 125).

Finally, Schubert (1991) defines *teacher lore* as “the study of the knowledge, ideas, perspectives, and understandings of teachers. In part it is inquiry into the beliefs, values, and images that guide teachers’ work. In this sense, it constitutes an attempt to learn what teachers learn from their experience” (p. 207). Teacher lore is inquiry into the values, beliefs, and images that direct teachers’ work and constitutes an attempt to learn what teachers learn from their experiences. Teachers are continuously in the midst of a blend of practice (reflective action) and theory (evolving ideas and personal belief systems). To assume that scholarship can focus productively on what teachers learn recognizes teachers as important partners in the creation of knowledge about education (Carter, 1993; Schwarz & Alberts, 1998). Teacher lore closely resembles narrative, while biography is more closely linked to autobiography. For the purpose of this study, the terms *autobiography* and *narrative* will be interchangeably used to describe the methodology. Below I describe narrative research in more detail.

Narrative research allows multiple interpretations to develop, yet attempts to persuade readers by the authors’ artistic visions (Eisner, 1981, 1998). By exploring my experiences graphically, I hoped to engage readers as well as involve them in the experiences of my life. Solas (1992) describes autobiography as the “life story of just one individual who is the central character of the life drama which unfolds. It presupposes that the person has developed an

identity, an individuality, and a consciousness in order to organize his or her own private history from the perspective of the present” (p. 212). I chose this methodology because I believe my identity as a literate person has been shaped through the comics medium and my identity as a teacher has been shaped through my identity as a literate person.

Through narrative writing about their own lives, teachers especially can use reflection and introspection to take a deeper look into the ways in which they interact with students, how they deal with situations in a classroom, and how they function within their own teacher identity (Hart, 1996). Hart discusses the reflective process of educators discovering their teacher identities. He writes that, “narrative accounts portray how teachers come to understand their lives in classrooms. They suggest that teachers actively work and struggle to achieve meaning and understanding” (p. 68). He explains that “we need to find ways to encourage teachers to do some writing about their thoughts and practices, their philosophies, their values and beliefs, their worldviews” (p. 74). When teachers write about their thoughts, practices, philosophies, values, beliefs and worldviews, it can help them further develop their teacher identity.

Both personal narrative and autobiographical writing can play a role in the understanding of one’s identity as an individual. I was both researcher and participant as I used my own personal experience to create a graphic novella that described my interaction with the comics culture, comic medium and the graphic literature phenomenon. Graphic autobiography was an appropriate methodological approach for this study because through this medium I was able to not only chronicle my personal experience within the realm of comic and graphic literature, but also model the style and benefits of reading multimodal text. Therefore, readers might better understand visual and graphic literacy as well as the value of narrative research.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue for the importance of teacher development through narrative: “Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it” (p. 18). In a similar way, Butt and Raymond (1987) argue that biography, and by extension autobiography, is a valid and useful method for discerning what teachers think and also for providing a vehicle for recording and interpreting teachers’ voices. Coulter and Smith (2009) note that narrative research accounts are “renderings of the result of *research* (data collected in multiple forms, analyzed, and reported) in which the researcher balances the interests of story-telling against the inclusion of every literal detail uncovered in her research” (p. 587, emphasis in original).

The Researcher’s Role

Creswell (2009) suggests that researchers must position themselves within the research. The researcher must acknowledge how his or her personal, cultural, or historical experience may guide the interpretation of the collected information or data. “Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. Their interpretations cannot be separated from their own backgrounds, history, contexts, and prior understandings” (Creswell, 2009, p. 176). Within autobiographical research, interpretations are formed *from* the researcher’s own background, history, contexts, and prior understanding, which can help eliminate misinterpretations of information (Bullough & Pinnigar, 2001; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Lianghua, 2009). Plummer (1983) acknowledges that autobiography has often been criticized for its lack of reliability and validity, but argues that through a process of critical examination in which each item of information is tested against other items and the totality of the picture being built up, it is possible to assess thoroughly the evidence, generalizations, inferences, interpretations and conclusions drawn from, and hence the

validity of, accounts.

Some researchers contend that autobiographical research presupposes that one can ever be fully self-aware, which is not always the case (Gergen, 1991; Hansen, 2009; Michelson, 2011). Hansen (2009) argues that even the word *awareness* frames knowledge of the self “in terms of a simplistic epistemic dichotomy. That is, one can either be in a state of unawareness, lacking true knowledge of self, or one can come to acquire accurate, final knowledge of the self (i.e., awareness)” (p. 191). Michelson (2011), too, discusses the fictiveness of autobiographical narrative and argues that autobiography does not so much allow writers to discover and express a “true” self, as it does teach them how to invent one.

Within autobiographical research, the researcher draws on his or her personal, cultural, and historical experience to guide a reflection, analysis and interpretation of the “collected information” or personal experience of their life (Bullough & Pinnigar, 2001; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Demetrio, 2007; Lianghua, 2009). To position myself within the research, I initially created a graphic character that guided the reader through a graphic journey of my personal experiences by creating a current image of myself that stays consistent throughout the entire graphic piece. This character spoke to the reader as though a conversation is taking place between reader and researcher, amidst panels of flashbacks from my life experiences. In the final draft, I decided to confine the graphic character to the novella portion of the thesis.

Demetrio (2007) observes that engagement of readers is important in autobiography: “Creating an autobiography, in this sense, means not only leaving written evidence of our story, but also asking others to become interested in what we have experienced through the exercise of writing, and dealing with the writings of others as if they were one’s own” (p. 253). The method of having the researcher/narrator talk to the reader as an audience member or acquaintance will

help the reader invest in the concepts the narrator is discussing and therefore become invested in the narrator's story, theory and purpose (McCloud, 1993). If readers become invested in what the narrator is saying, and they believe it to be the truth, they may be more likely to put the narrator's views, ideas and suggestions into practice (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

Data Collection

Within autobiographical research, data collection occurs in the form of reflection: gathering memories, sorting experiences, choosing important life instances, recalling 'aha' moments, and remembering pivotal pieces of information from one's past that relate to the specific topic at hand (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Lianghua, 2009). An organic progression of this process is imperative, and attention to detail must be paid in order to fully gain a rich understanding of one's past. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) give several guidelines for autobiographical self-study forms. The guidelines include: promoting insight and interpretation; portraying character development; and having authentic voice. The researchers argue that a personal narrative is a "good read" if it

attends to the 'nodal moments' of teaching and being a teacher educator and thereby enables reader insight or understanding into self, reveals a lively conscience and balanced sense of self-importance, tells a recognizable teacher or teacher educator story, portrays character development in the face of serious issues within a complex setting, gives place to the dynamic struggle of living life whole, and offers new perspective. (p. 19)

I kept each of these important guidelines in mind during the process of reflection and when storyboarding the graphic portion of the autobiography.

The data collected in the process of reflection map my unique story through the medium of a graphic novella. These findings showcase blocks of time within my life - childhood, adolescence, university student, preservice teacher, graduate student, graduate assistant, and researcher – all of which acted to shape my literate and teacher identity. Hart (1996) explains

that researchers can better understand teachers through collaborative learning about their teaching pedagogies, which can be done through reflective practices:

We think that, as researchers, we can get closer to the core of teacher thinking and practice if we can find ways to learn collaboratively to help teachers to understand their personal practical theories, assumptions, values, ideologies, and even their worldviews in ways that we and they can interpret. We believe that this process of coming to understand takes time and that it must involve interactive forms of reflection (i.e., reflective conversations) and action. (p. 66)

Method and Materials

The method I chose to produce the graphic autobiography was the graphic novella, which is bound paneled pages with images I created in comic form. I used photographs, images that I have manipulated and images that I have created digitally to both tell *and* show readers my life experience with the comics culture, with graphic literacy, and the ways I benefitted from engaging with multimodal text in my identity formation. Identifiable individuals were featured with the permission of the participants, with their understanding that the photographs were being taken for the purpose of the study. These individuals signed Lakehead University image release forms (Appendix II) granting me permission to use them in the graphic novella. For the remaining individuals who appear in the novella, generic images were manipulated and pseudonyms were used. Photographs that were taken prior to this study were used with permission by showing specific graphic novella pages to the identifiable individuals who also signed the image release forms. The release forms will be stored securely for five years.

I used a computer program called ComicLife 2¹ to help turn my photographs into graphic art, to create page layouts, and to insert text into the panels. I also used the digital manipulation programs *Microsoft Digital Image Pro 7.0* and Apple's *Aperture* to help create digital images before importing them into ComicLife.

¹ Developed by Plasq: <http://plasq.com/products/comiclife/mac>

The effort and energy that went into creating the autobiographical graphic novella was both extensive and rewarding. I made critical decisions along the way on such subjects as colour, panel layout, panel format, panel size, lettering, captions, transitions, and use of the gutter. I drew on past experience, photographs, conversations and situations that occurred that helped to shape my identity as both a literate individual and as a future educator. The process took place over several months with many versions and revisions. Discovering one's own literate identity takes a great deal of reflection and personal understanding. My personal reflection was ongoing throughout the entire process. It entailed many conversations with friends and family, looking into my own past through journals, diaries and school work, and critically reflecting on as many important past experiences as possible.

The process of storyboarding the entire graphic novella was extensive. It first took writing and re-writing several pages of what I wanted to discuss, which led to section-by-section rough hand-drawn sketches of each panel of each page for the entire work.

Each picture is hand chosen to make this novella as realistic and true to my life as possible. The process of finding, taking, scanning, and editing pictures was a challenging one, and took approximately 120 hours. I searched through old pictures for weeks trying to find the ones I wanted to use, and for many pages the pictures were changed several times before I was content with the look of the page. Many pictures were digitally created from other images, or combined from several images either taken myself or found online to create the desired visual effect.

Every panel is a specific shape and size, and each panel was selected for a specific reason. Some panels are meant to draw the reader's eye in; some are meant to have the reader spend longer on the image, or simply skim over the image to convey a conversational tone. Since

panel arrangement is very important to the flow of the finished piece, I created several different page layout options for every page to find the right one in relation to the page before it, as well as the page after it.

Further, my experience as a fully licensed entrepreneur running a digital photography studio enabled me to create the images that best portray my experiences.

Data Analysis, Interpretation and Reporting the Findings

Demetrio (2007) draws on Foucault (1988), Lejeune (1975) and Olney (1972) to explain that the narrative teaching methodology (which focuses on writing about oneself) has evident educational objectives of a cognitive nature:

Dealing with autobiography in a strict sense, in fact, doesn't mean only dealing with memory; it involves the activation and integrated exercise of several cognitive abilities and forms of thought – retrospective and introspective, logical and metaphorical, reflexive and explorative, etc. – as well as the development of self-reflective or meta-cognitive abilities, related to reflection on the work of one's own mind. (p. 265)

Although the gathering and interpretation of data are unique for qualitative autobiographical research, it still requires a specific and labour-intensive process that calls for reflection, introspection and self-knowledge in order to view one's own life subjectively as well as objectively. By viewing one's life as subjectively and objectively as possible one may be able to gain a critical perspective on one's personal experiences.

Grumet (1981) views autobiography as one way in which we can obtain a critical perspective on educational experiences that might otherwise be taken for granted, and can reveal the extent to which our personal histories shape whatever it is we as individuals are trying to achieve in curriculum work. In order to gain a critical perspective on my own educational experiences, I attempted to view my past as both emotionally invested and removed, in order to

present a well-rounded picture of each experience. Lianghua (2009) explains that teacher identities are best learned through oral storytelling:

To study the teacher's personal knowledge about a good teacher, you can ask teachers directly or observe their behavior, and you can also read their professional theses. However, the most effective way is to listen to teachers 'speak out' their personal life history which is the approach to oral history in education or educational autobiography. (pp. 125-6)

I used my past connections and experiences with graphic literacy to illustrate how they inform and connect to my future experiences in a classroom, which in turn will hopefully demonstrate to readers one way to use visual and graphic literacy to benefit their students/children.

The way in which I have chosen to report my findings, that is, a graphic novella, helps me put theory into practice, and may help readers understand that graphic literacy is more than a simple visual aid while reading. It requires being immersed in the literature through multiple modes. Students and adults may benefit in different ways while reading graphic literature (Edwards, 2009; Kress, 2004; McVicker, 2007; Seyfried, 2008). The medium attempts to illustrate *how* graphic literature benefitted me, how it might benefit other students, readers and teachers, and how it informed my teacher identity.

Not only did this study attempt to promote the use of graphic literature in the classroom, but it also portrayed benefits of sharing personal experiences through autobiography. Demetrio (2007) describes the benefits of using the autobiographical method in schools:

Schools should be able to offer a variety of opportunities aimed at increasing narrative skills, setting up autobiographical labs dedicated both to journal and retrospective writing. The purpose is to create a special space at school for young people and to promote actual pedagogic projects aimed at allowing them to live through a time of reflection on themselves, and also to "narrate themselves" in public, to share their own stories with others, and experience various narrative genres, from poetry to theatre. (p. 266)

Credibility and Trustworthiness

It is important to discuss the credibility and trustworthiness of the autobiographical method due to the limitations of memory and self-awareness, as well as the biases a scholar faces in terms of gender, race, and social class. Creswell (2009) defines qualitative validity to mean that “the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures, while qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects” (p. 190).

Many factors may influence the authenticity of autobiography. Due to the limitations of memory itself, many researchers find recollections problematic and question the validity of recovered memories (e.g., Ceci, Huffman, & Smith, 1994; Ceci & Loftus, 1994; Goldstein & Farmer, 1992). Even if memories can be accurately recalled, there are many factors that must be taken into account when discussing what affects each memory. Nakash and Brody (2006) argue that socio-contextual factors influence the quality of personal memories and that autobiographical memories are dependent on the kinds of situations that “precipitate the emergence of the memory, the personality motives that are characteristic of the individuals reporting the memory, and the methods used to measure motives” (p. 52). Time, place, emotional states, significant events, social role, mindset attached to the memory and life events all have the potential to affect memories; many different contextual factors influence the availability of personal memories and personality variables may moderate that effect (Christensen, Wood, & Barrett, 2003; Rusting, 1999; Setliff & Marmurek, 2002).

In my graphic novella, I attempted to be as honest and truthful about events as I could. I was aware that withholding experiences or being uncooperative with the process of self-reflection would hinder my results and therefore I spent much time writing, re-writing, reading,

researching and exploring my past. As I noted above, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) believe that autobiographical researchers should follow several self-study guidelines, some of which include engaging history forthrightly and taking an honest stand. I attempted to be as honest as possible when writing the script for the novella, and struggled to avoid emotional responses to the data (journals, photographs, memories, etc.). Grumet (1990) points to autobiography's unique relationship between the author and meaning: "Autobiography becomes a medium for both teaching and research because each entry expresses the particular peace its author has made between the individual of his or her subjectivity and the intersubjective and public character of meaning" (p. 324). As well, Coulter and Smith (2009) discuss narrator reliability, or the degree to which the reader can trust the narrator, and note that the author can build in signals to the reader that the narrator's perspective may or may not be entirely trusted. My objective was to be as honest as possible in the hope that readers would trust the narrator.

Describing teachers' lives is essential to understanding teachers' practices, (Butt & Raymond, 1988; Connelly and Clandinin, 1987; Goodson & Walker, 1991) although personal limitations can arise in relation to a narrator's gender, race and social class. Goodson and Walker (1991) note: "To the degree that we invest our 'self' in our teaching, experience, and background therefore shape our practice," (p. 144) and that considerations of class, gender, and ethnicity are important, but teachers' lives are unique, even idiosyncratic, and cannot be reduced to broad social forces. In contrast, Usher (1998) asserts "discourses and positioning shape what and how we experience the world... we are constituted in language and positioned differently depending on the discursive practices of gender, race, class, ethnicity and other marks of difference" (p. 19-20).

Alaya (1995) describes how a participant in an autobiographical study addressed her

limitations; “Rose confesses herself, at one point, the ‘product of a white middle-class suburb of New York,’ on one level a frank admission of her limitations, on another a claim to a readership identified with her race and class” (p. 92). I am fully aware that my being a white, middle-class female afforded me many privileges that led to the construction of both my literate identity and my teacher identity. My family’s financial situation allowed my literature obsession to flourish and my mother’s university education and profession as a teacher afforded me many educational opportunities to excel.

Summary

This chapter presented autobiographical research terms and definitions, an explanation of autobiographical methodology, the researcher’s role in this study, how data were collected and the methods and materials that were used. It also described the means of data analysis, how the findings will be reported and issues related to credibility and trustworthiness. The following section presents the data in the form of the autobiographical graphic novella.

HELLO!

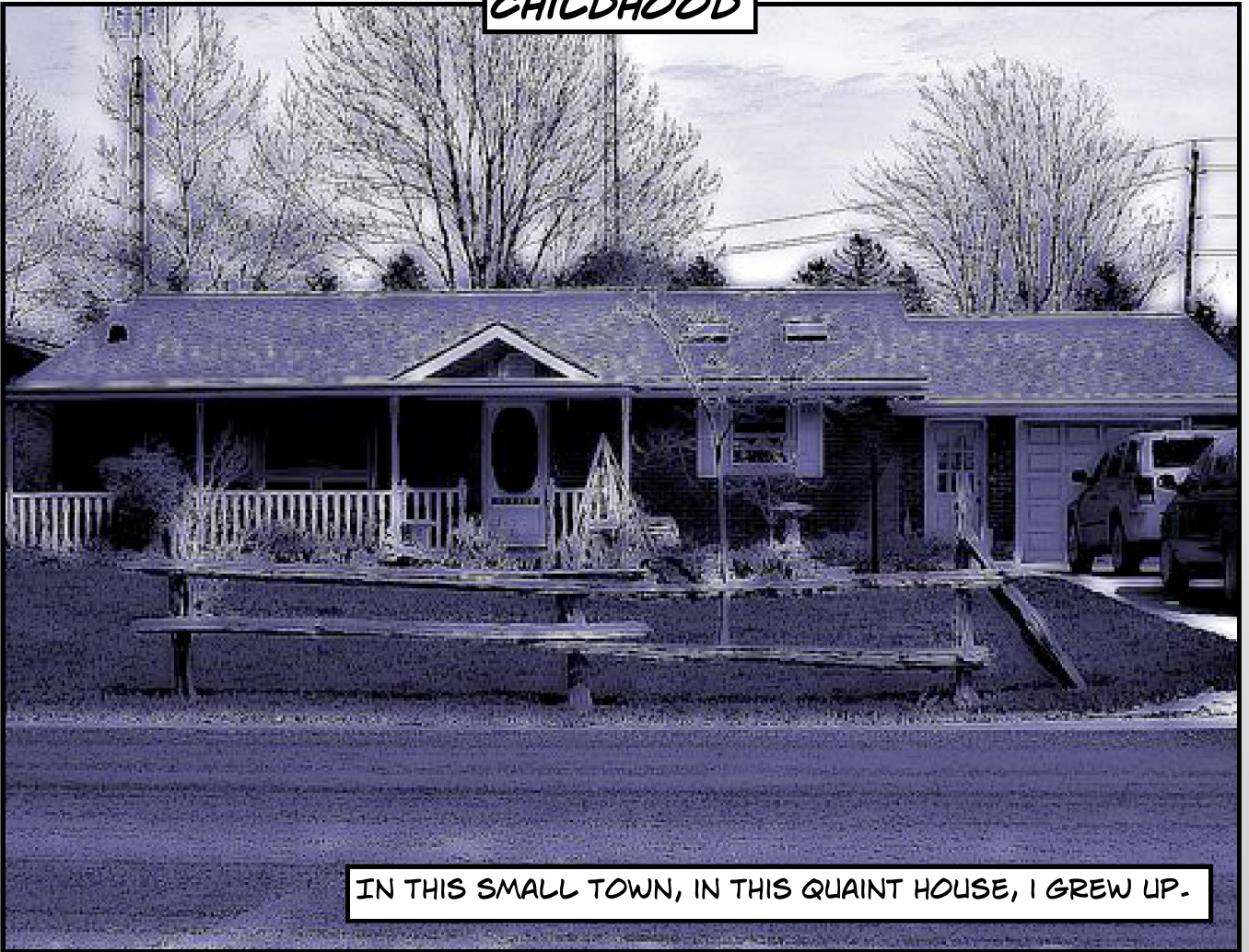
MY NAME IS ELLEN MACEYOVSKI, AND I AM A GRADUATE STUDENT AT LAKEHEAD UNIVERSITY. I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT GRAPHIC LITERACY AND I'M EXCITED TO BEGIN THIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GRAPHIC JOURNEY WITH YOU. HERE I WILL TAKE AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT MY EXPERIENCES AND EXPLORE EACH TIME PERIOD MORE FULLY. THIS WILL GIVE YOU A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MY JOURNEY AS A LITERATE BEING, WHICH EVENTUALLY SHAPED MY TEACHER IDENTITY. I SHALL GUIDE YOU THROUGH SEVERAL MAIN STAGES OF MY LIFE: CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, BEGINNING AS A TEACHER-CANDIDATE, AND GRADUATE STUDIES.



SO LET'S GET STARTED! IT ALL BEGAN IN THE SMALL FARMING COMMUNITY OF WHEATLEY, ONTARIO.

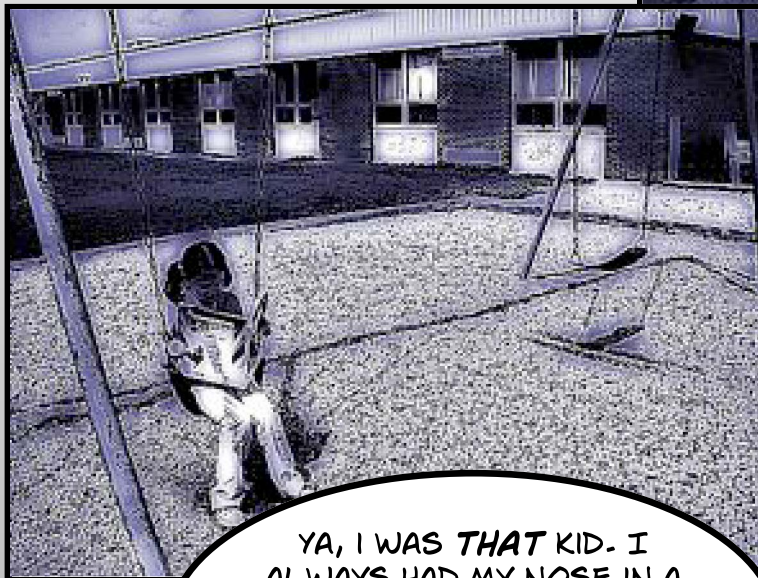
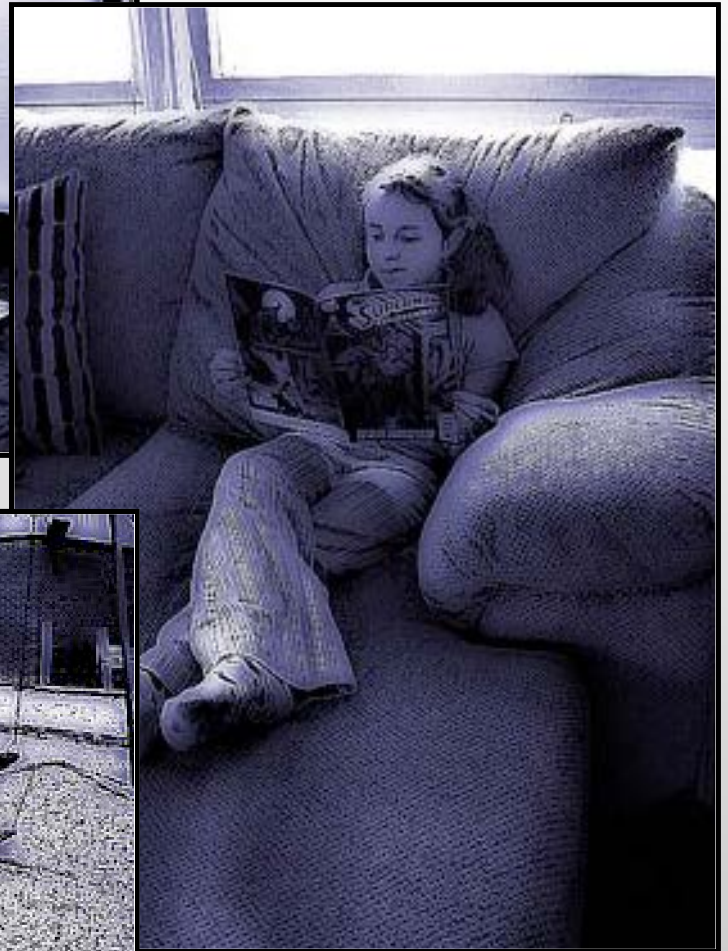
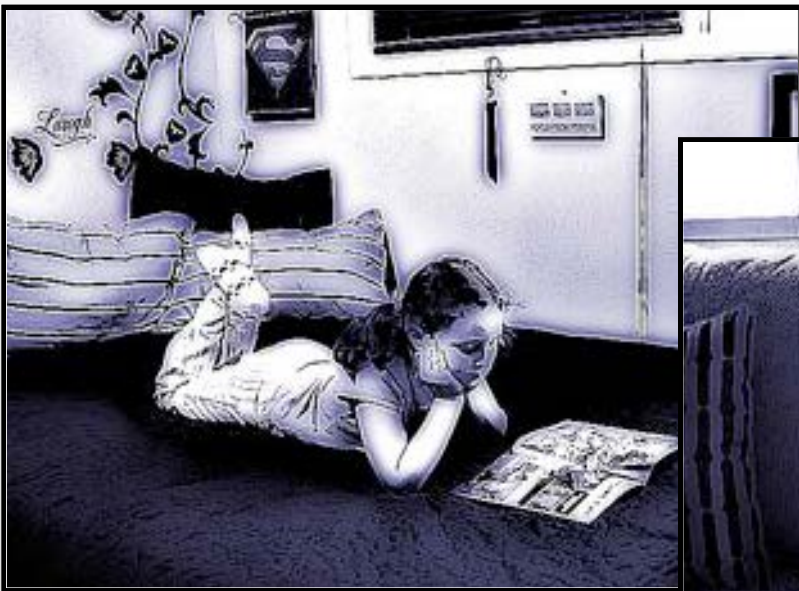


CHILDHOOD



IN THIS SMALL TOWN, IN THIS QUAIN HOUSE, I GREW UP.

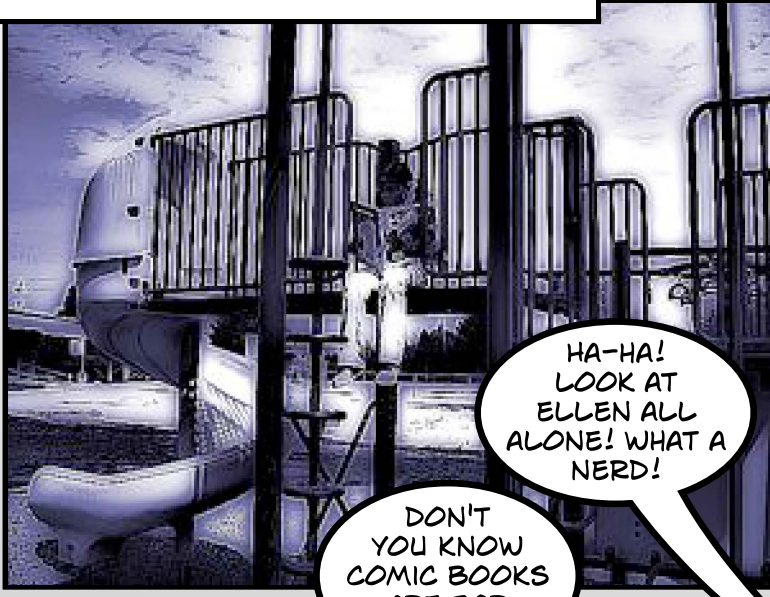




YA, I WAS *THAT KID*. I ALWAYS HAD MY NOSE IN A BOOK. I WAS CONSTANTLY READING COMIC BOOKS, GRAPHIC NOVELS AND MAGAZINES *EVERY CHANCE* I GOT.



BUT I DEFINITELY GOT TEASED FOR IT.



HA-HA!
LOOK AT
ELLEN ALL
ALONE! WHAT A
NERD!

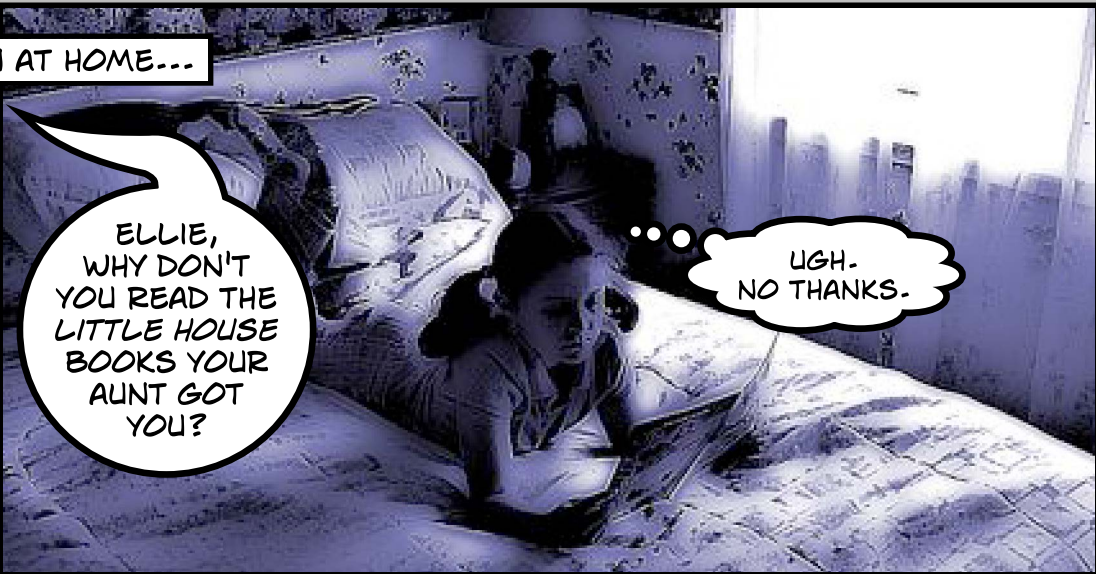
DON'T
YOU KNOW
COMIC BOOKS
ARE FOR
BOYS!!



I SPENT A LOT OF TIME ALONE.



EVEN AT HOME...

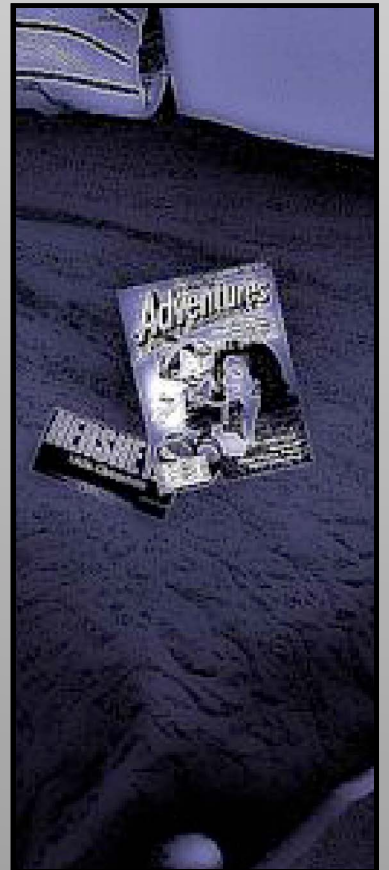


ELLIE,
WHY DON'T
YOU READ THE
LITTLE HOUSE
BOOKS YOUR
AUNT GOT
YOU?

UGH.
NO THANKS.



I WOULD CONSTANTLY GET IN TROUBLE AT SCHOOL FOR NOT READING WHAT WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE READING. I COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND WHY I WAS TOLD TO PUT MY BOOK AWAY..IN AN **ENGLISH CLASS!** I SWORE THAT IF I EVER BECAME A TEACHER, I WOULD NEVER DISCOURAGE STUDENTS FROM READING WHAT THEY WANTED...AS LONG AS THEY WERE READING!





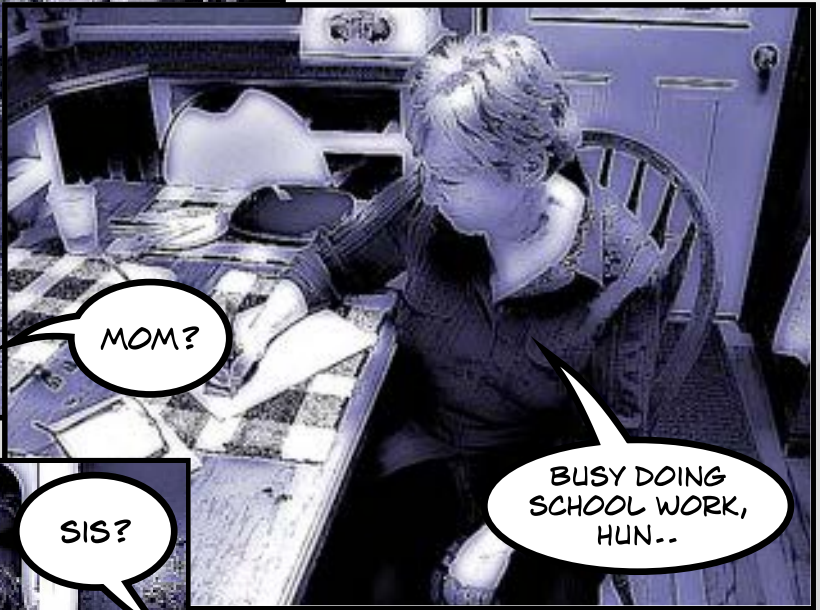
THANKS,
POPS! YOU'RE
THE BEST!

NO
PROBLEM,
KIDDO.



I KNEW MY PARENTS COULD NOT ALWAYS AFFORD TO GET ME NEW ISSUES EVERY WEEK, BUT SOMEHOW THEY DID ANYWAY. YEARS LATER, MY DAD TOLD ME THAT HE WOULD RATHER SPEND MONEY ON MY BOOK READING HABIT THAN JUST ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE.

TYPICAL WEEKENDS AT OUR HOUSE...



MOM?

BUSY DOING SCHOOL WORK, HUN..



SIS?

BUSY..



MATT?

MATT...?

BETWEEN MY WORKING, SUPER BUSY SUPERMOM, WHO IS A TEACHER, MY BEAUTIFUL TEENAGE SISTER WHO HAD HIGH SCHOOL AND BOYS TO WORRY ABOUT, AND MY HERMIT BROTHER WHO LIVED SILENTLY IN THE BASEMENT, I HAD TO FIND MY OWN MEANS OF ENTERTAINMENT...





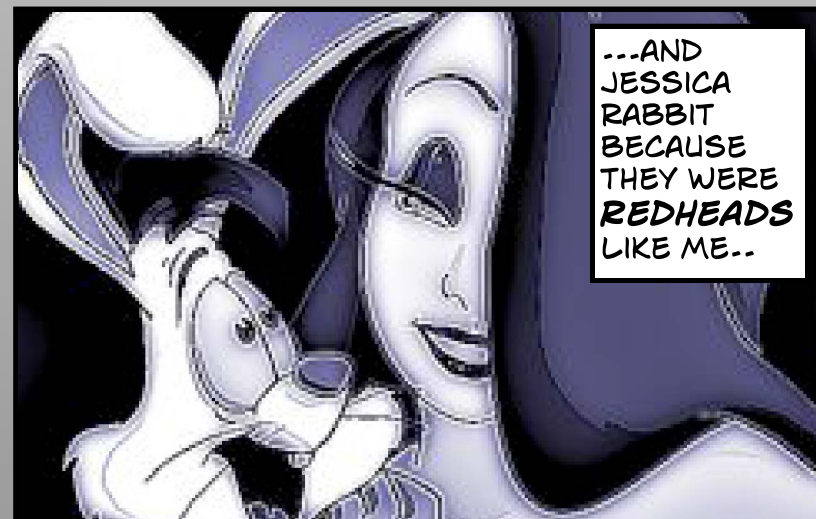
I BECAME FRIENDS WITH BRUCE WAYNE AND CLARK KENT...



...I WOULD HAVE SLEEPOVERS WITH BETTY AND VERONICA...



...I LOVED BATGIRL...

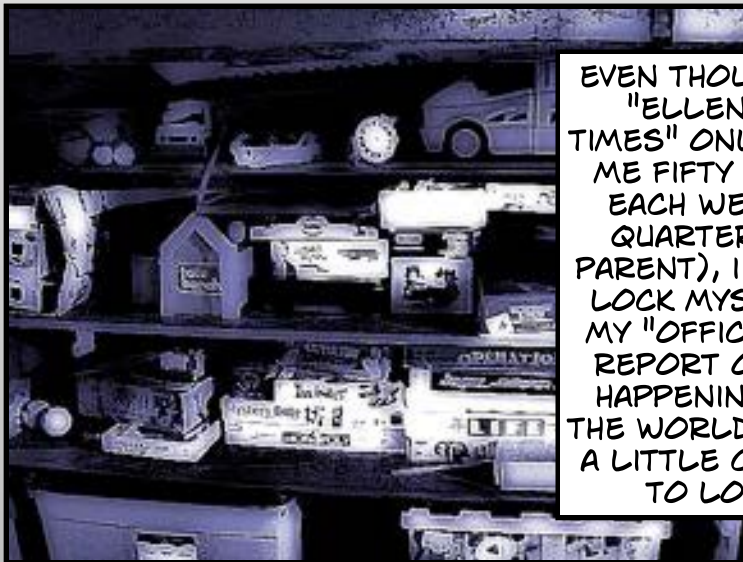


...AND JESSICA RABBIT BECAUSE THEY WERE REDHEADS LIKE ME..

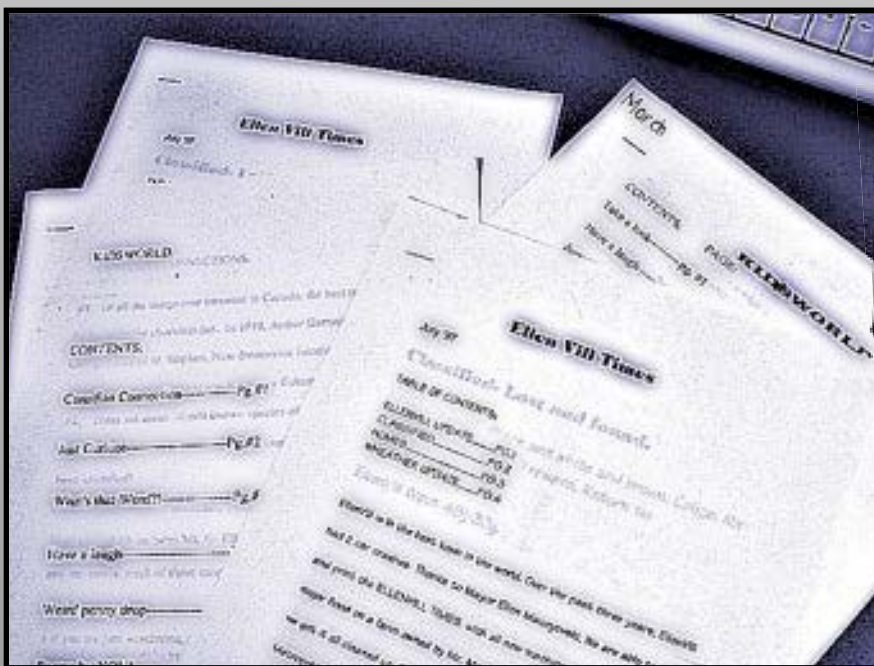


...AND I ADMIRERD LOIS LANE'S QUICK WIT AND INTELLECT.

OUR BASEMENT CRAWLSPACE WAS COLD AND DARK AND NO ONE LIKED TO BE DOWN THERE. IT WAS PERFECT FOR MY "OFFICE". I CREATED MY OWN NEWSPAPER TO BE A REPORTER LIKE LOIS LANE.

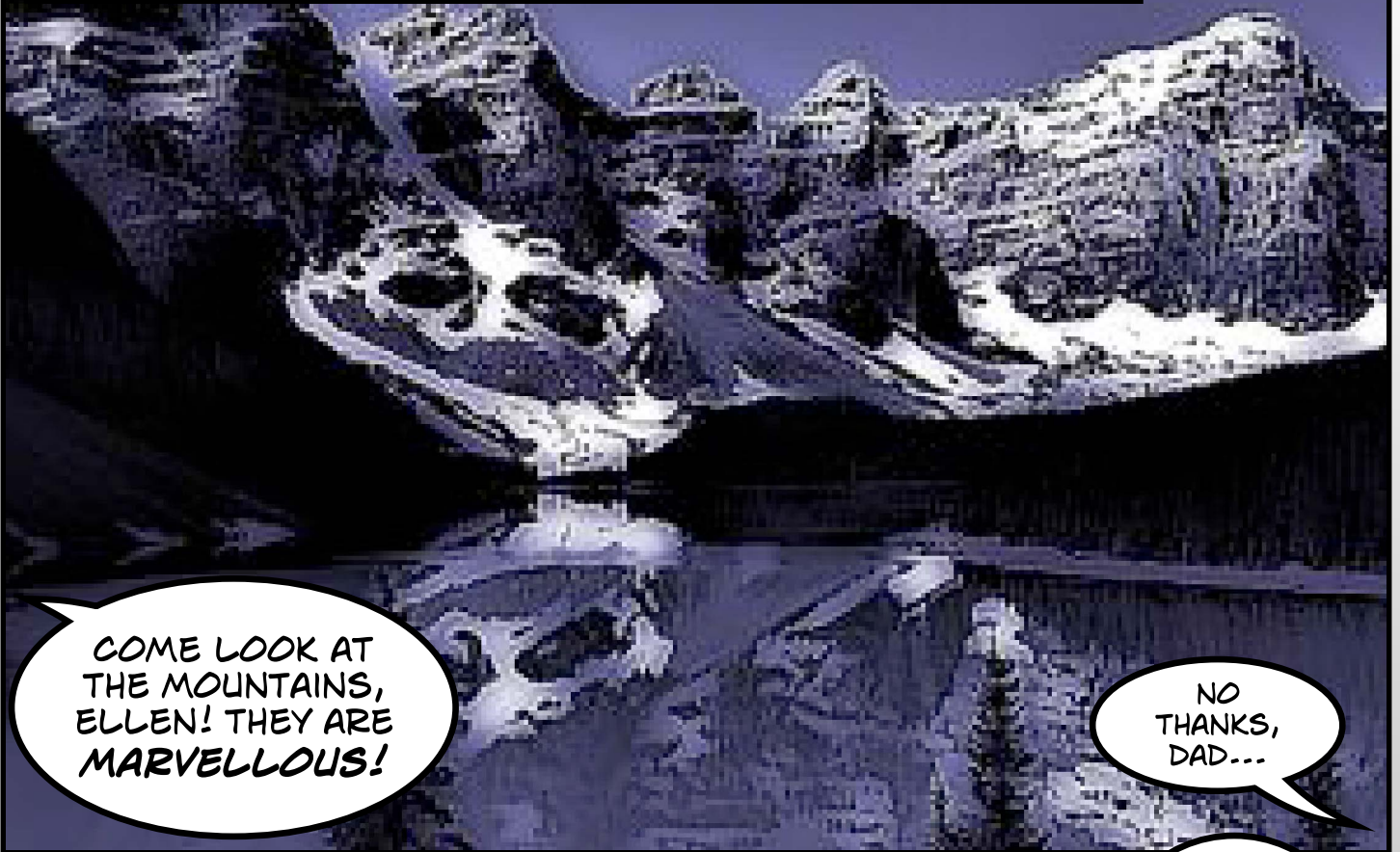


EVEN THOUGH THE "ELLENVILL TIMES" ONLY MADE ME FIFTY CENTS EACH WEEK (A QUARTER PER PARENT), I WOULD LOCK MYSELF IN MY "OFFICE" AND REPORT ON THE HAPPENINGS OF THE WORLD, TO BE A LITTLE CLOSER TO LOIS'.



I ALSO CREATED MY OWN MAGAZINE "KIDSWORLD" THAT WAS JUST LIKE "DISNEY ADVENTURES," THE POP CULTURE KIDS' MAGAZINE I WAS ADDICTED TO.

I DISTINCTLY REMEMBER MISSING MUCH OF THE BEAUTY OF WESTERN CANADA WHEN MY FAMILY TOOK A TRIP IN AN RV ONE SUMMER, BECAUSE ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS STAY IN THE BACK ROOM AND READ.



COME LOOK AT THE MOUNTAINS, ELLEN! THEY ARE MARVELLOUS!

NO THANKS, DAD...



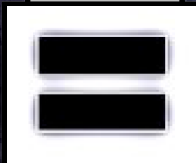
OH ELLEN, ALWAYS WITH YOUR NOSE STUCK IN A BOOK..

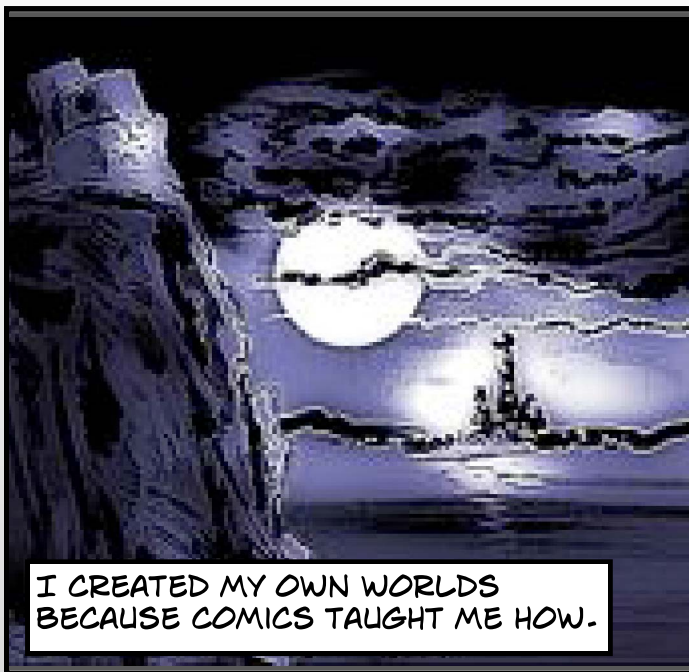


WHY WOULD I WANT TO LOOK AT BIG ROCKS WHEN THE UNIVERSE NEEDED SAVING?!



WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I USED TO THINK SUPERHEROES DID EXIST. I WAS CERTAIN MY DAD WAS SOMEHOW A SUPERHERO IN DISGUISE. HE WAS OUR FAMILY DOCTOR, LAWYER, CHEF, ACCOUNTANT, PLUMBER, CARPENTER, ELECTRICIAN, HUNTER, FISHERMAN, VETERINARIAN, COMEDIAN, ACADEMIC, ATHLETE, ROLLER-COASTER ENTHUSIAST, BROKEN-HEART HEALER, AND AS FAR AS I WAS CONCERNED, SUPERDAD. AS I GREW OLDER, I BEGAN WISHING THE WORLD CONTAINED MORE SUPERHEROES LIKE HIM.





I CREATED MY OWN WORLDS
BECAUSE COMICS TAUGHT ME HOW.



WHILE I CREATED AND EXPLORED THEM....



...I BECAME A BETTER READER...



...AND WRITER.



EVENTUALLY I WAS ONE OF THE BEST READERS IN CLASS.



WE MOVED TO READING CHAPTER BOOKS AND WHILE MY NOSE WAS STUCK IN SWEET VALLEY HIGH AND SUNNYSIDE FRIENDS, I FOUND THAT ALL THE SAME RULES APPLIED.



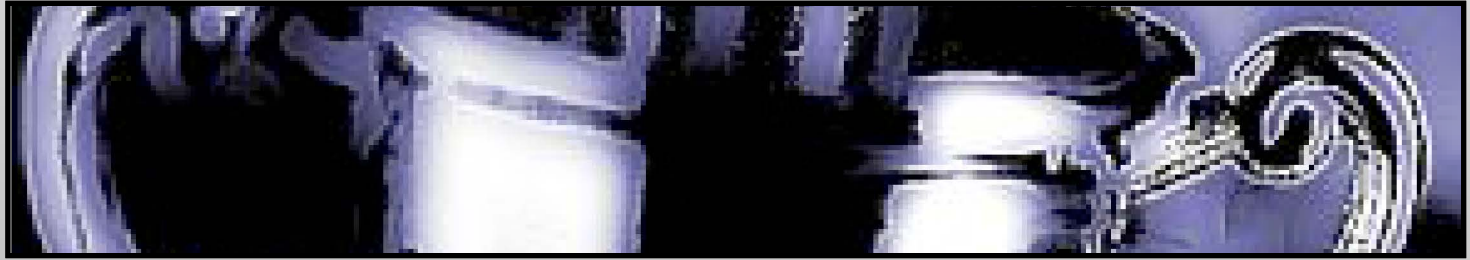
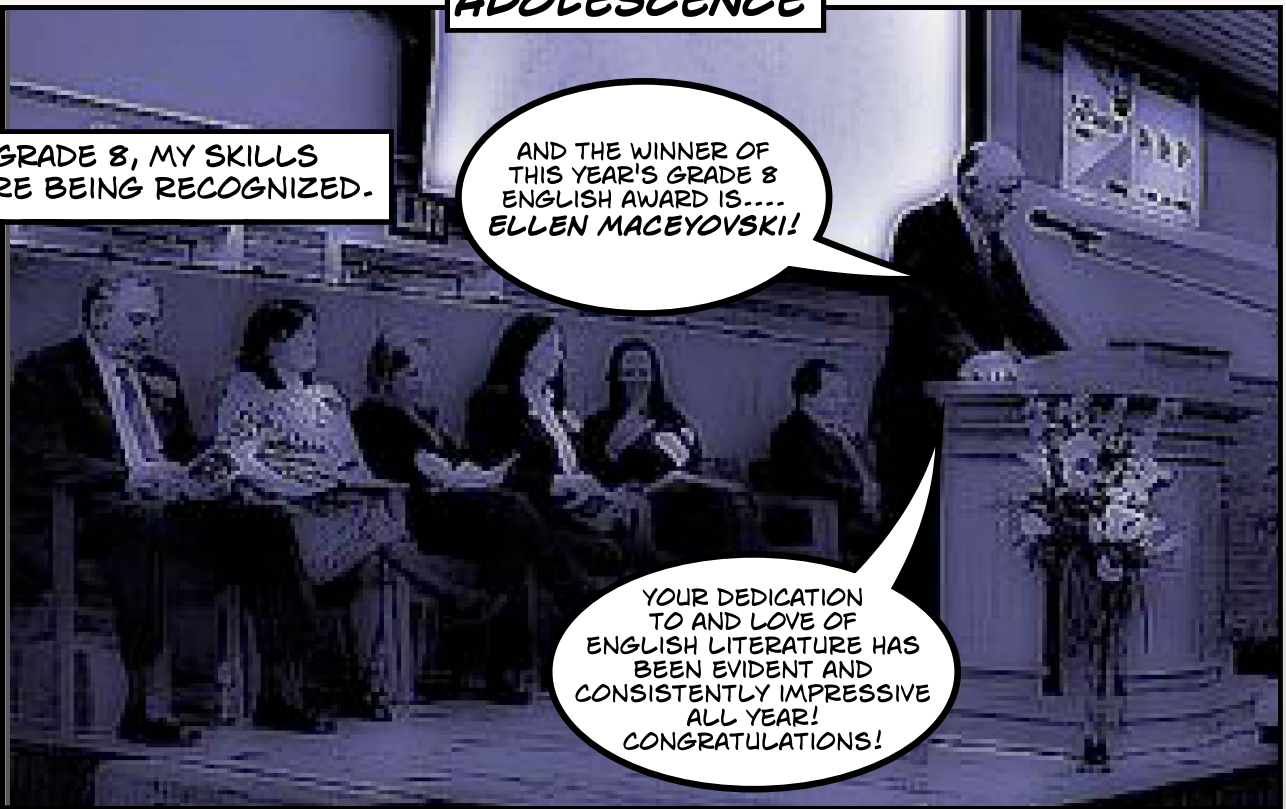
SINCE I HAD BEEN READING SO OFTEN AND FOR SO LONG, READING CAME EASILY AND NATURALLY FOR ME. READING BECAME SO MUCH A PART OF MY LIFE THAT ENGLISH QUICKLY BECAME MY FAVOURITE SUBJECT AND LED ME TO EXCEL IN ALL OTHER AREAS OF SCHOOL.

ADOLESCENCE

BY GRADE 8, MY SKILLS WERE BEING RECOGNIZED.

AND THE WINNER OF THIS YEAR'S GRADE 8 ENGLISH AWARD IS.... ELLEN MACEYOVSKI!

YOUR DEDICATION TO AND LOVE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE HAS BEEN EVIDENT AND CONSISTENTLY IMPRESSIVE ALL YEAR! CONGRATULATIONS!



EVERYBODY SAY "HERE COMES HIGH SCHOOL!!"



BY THE TIME I HIT HIGH SCHOOL, MY READING AND WRITING SKILLS LED ME TO THE POSITION OF BOTH THE YOUNGEST YEARBOOK EDITOR IN THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY...



...AND THE EDITOR OF THE SCHOOL NEWSPAPER.





MY BEDROOM WAS JAM-PACKED WITH SUPERHERO MEMORIBILIA, FROM THE COMFORTER TO THE LIGHTSWITCH, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN. MY HERO OF CHOICE WAS SUPERMAN.

I WAS MADE FUN OF FOR BEING A GIRL WHO LIKED SUPERMAN, BECAUSE ONLY BOYS READ COMIC BOOKS. SO I STARTED ADDING SUPERGIRL THINGS TO THE MIX, AND THAT SEEMED TO BE MORE ACCEPTABLE.



I WAS SUPERGIRL FOR HALLOWEEN THREE YEARS IN A ROW.





HEY,
ELLEN



HEY,
KOLTEN

SO, I FOUND THIS PENCIL SHARPENER THAT I'VE HAD SINCE I WAS A KID. I THINK IT MIGHT BE A COLLECTABLE. ANYWAY, I KNOW YOU LOVE SUPERMAN, SO I WANTED YOU TO HAVE IT.



.....!!!!



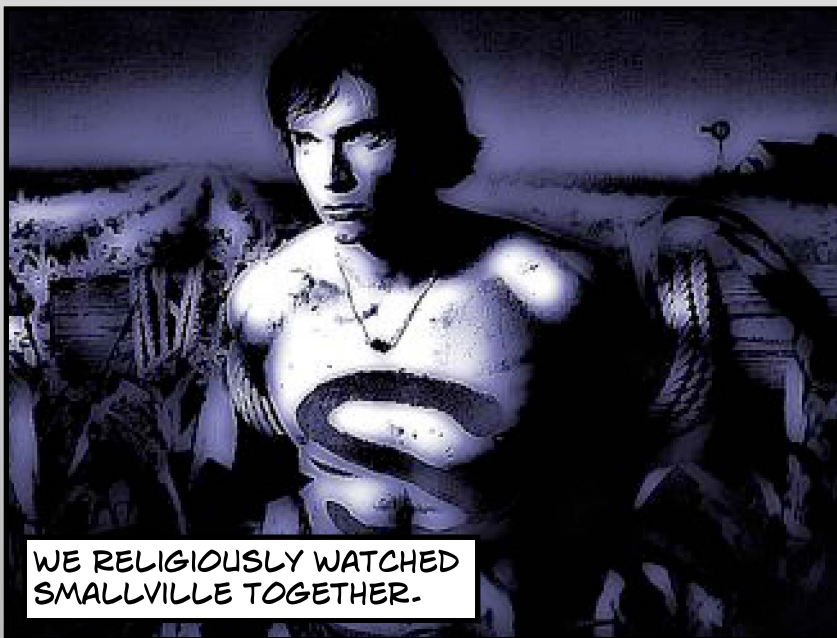
WE BEGAN DATING IMMEDIATELY.



WE SPENT OUR SATURDAYS READING THE MISADVENTURES OF THE JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA, AND WATCHING SUPERMAN MOVIE MARATHONS.



HE MADE ME A HAND-SEWN SUPERMAN BLANKET FOR CHRISTMAS.



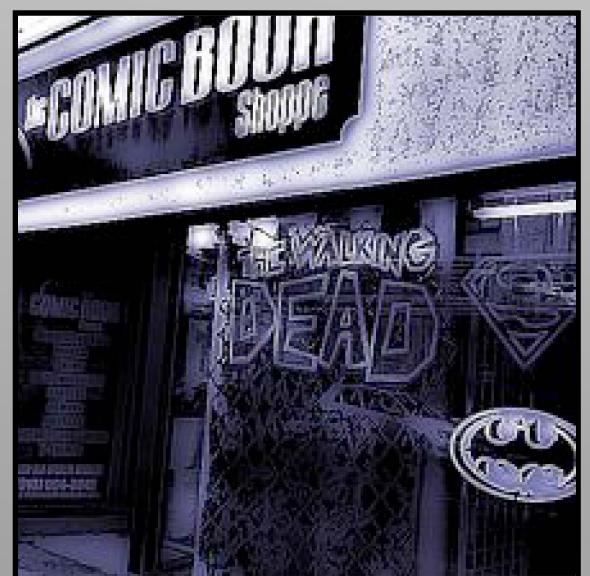
WE RELIGIOUSLY WATCHED SMALLVILLE TOGETHER.



I THOUGHT IT WAS LOVE.



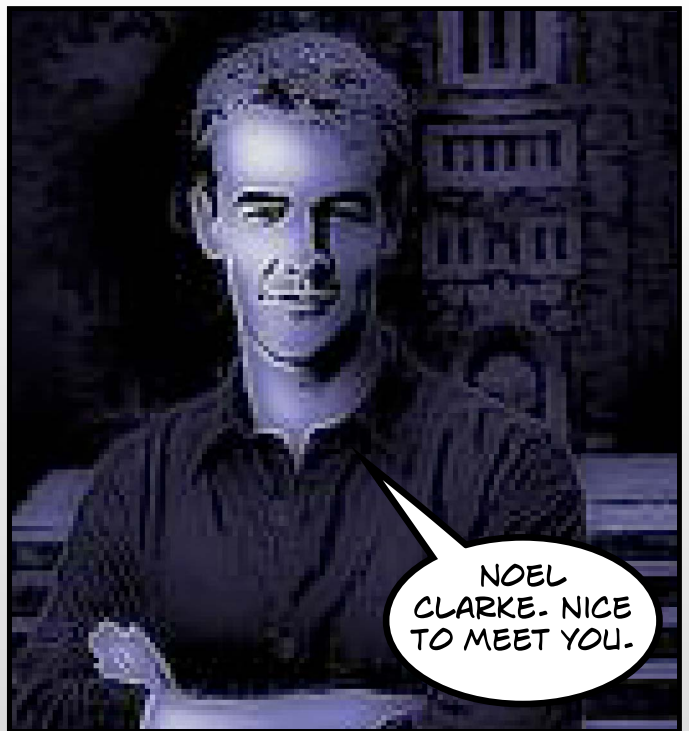
TURNS OUT HE WAS NOT THE MILD-MANNERED CLARKE KENT TO MY LOIS LANE, SO I STARTED GOING TO THE COMIC BOOK STORE ALONE.



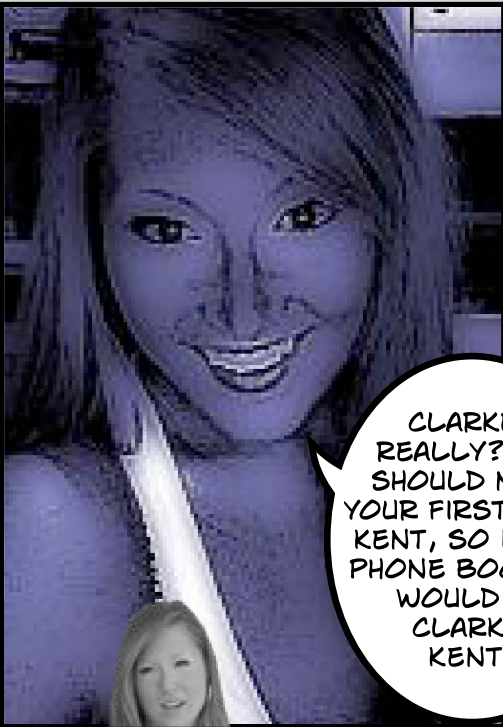
SHORTLY AFTER...



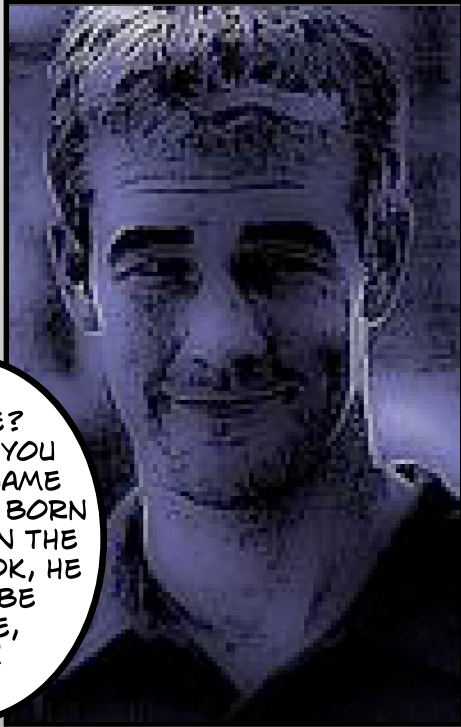
HI! I'M ELLEN.



NOEL CLARKE. NICE TO MEET YOU.

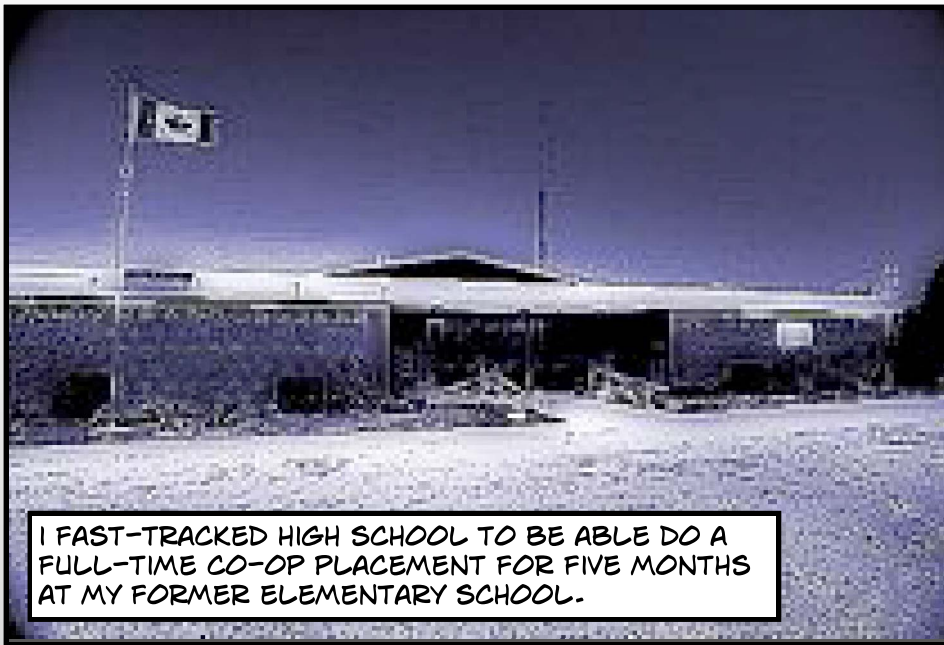


CLARKE? REALLY? YOU SHOULD NAME YOUR FIRST BORN KENT, SO IN THE PHONE BOOK, HE WOULD BE CLARKE, KENT!



HE LAUGHED AND HUMOURED ME, BUT THOUGHT THIS IDEA WAS RIDICULOUS. WE MET UP AGAIN IN UNIVERSITY, AND DATED FOR FOUR YEARS. I CHANGED MY MIND ABOUT THE NAME EARLY ON, THEN LATER, ABOUT HIM.





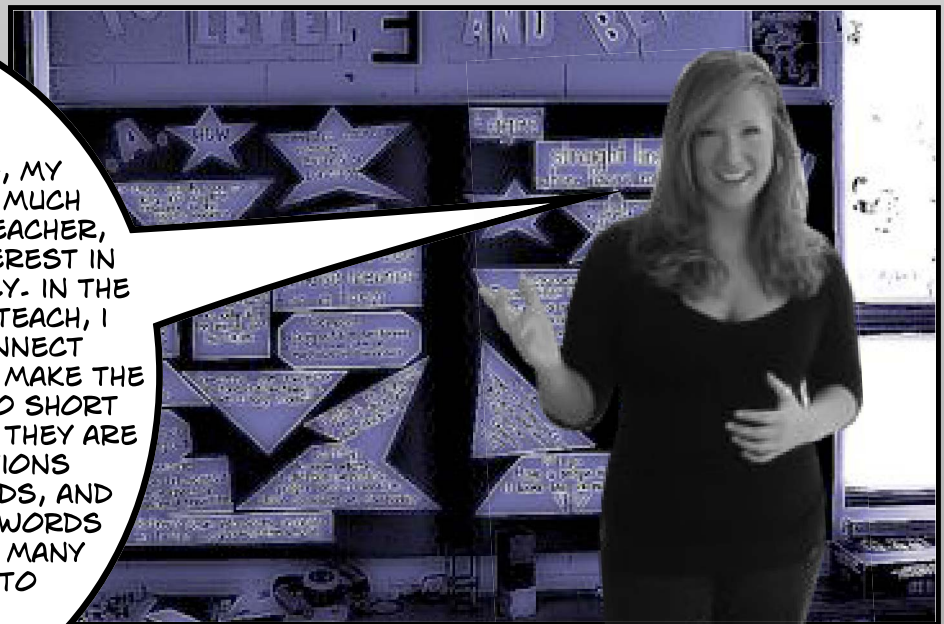
I FAST-TRACKED HIGH SCHOOL TO BE ABLE DO A FULL-TIME CO-OP PLACEMENT FOR FIVE MONTHS AT MY FORMER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL.



I WORKED IN THE LIBRARY AS WELL AS WITH GRADES 1-3.



ASIDE FROM THE PHOTOCOPYING AND BULLETIN-BOARD MAKING, MY PLACEMENT TAUGHT ME SO MUCH ABOUT HOW TO BE A GOOD TEACHER, AS WELL AS SPARKED MY INTEREST IN THE TOPIC OF GRAPHIC LITERACY. IN THE GRADE TWO CLASS I HELPED TEACH, I FOUND THERE WAS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN STUDENTS TRYING TO MAKE THE LEAP FROM PICTURE BOOKS TO SHORT NOVELS. UP UNTIL THAT POINT, THEY ARE TAUGHT TO MAKE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PICTURES AND WORDS, AND THEN SUDDENLY, ONLY HAVE WORDS TO WORK WITH. THIS MAKES MANY OF THEM APPREHENSIVE TO MAKE THE SWITCH TO NOVELS.

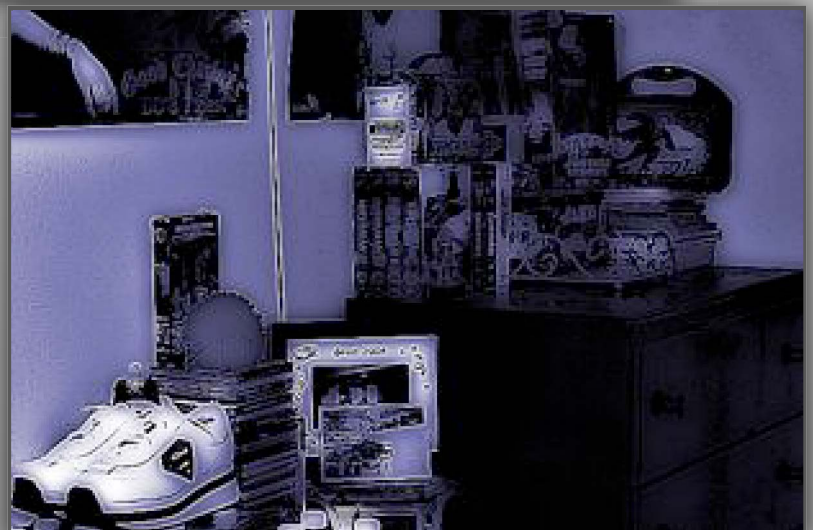




WHEN I MOVED INTO RESIDENCE FOR UNIVERSITY, MY PARENTS ALLOWED ME ONE 'SUPERHERO BOX'; JUST ENOUGH MEMORABILIA TO SEMI-COVER MY NEW DORM ROOM WITH MY FAVOURITE PASTIME.



I LOVED THIS WORLD AND DREAMT IN ACTION SEQUENCES.

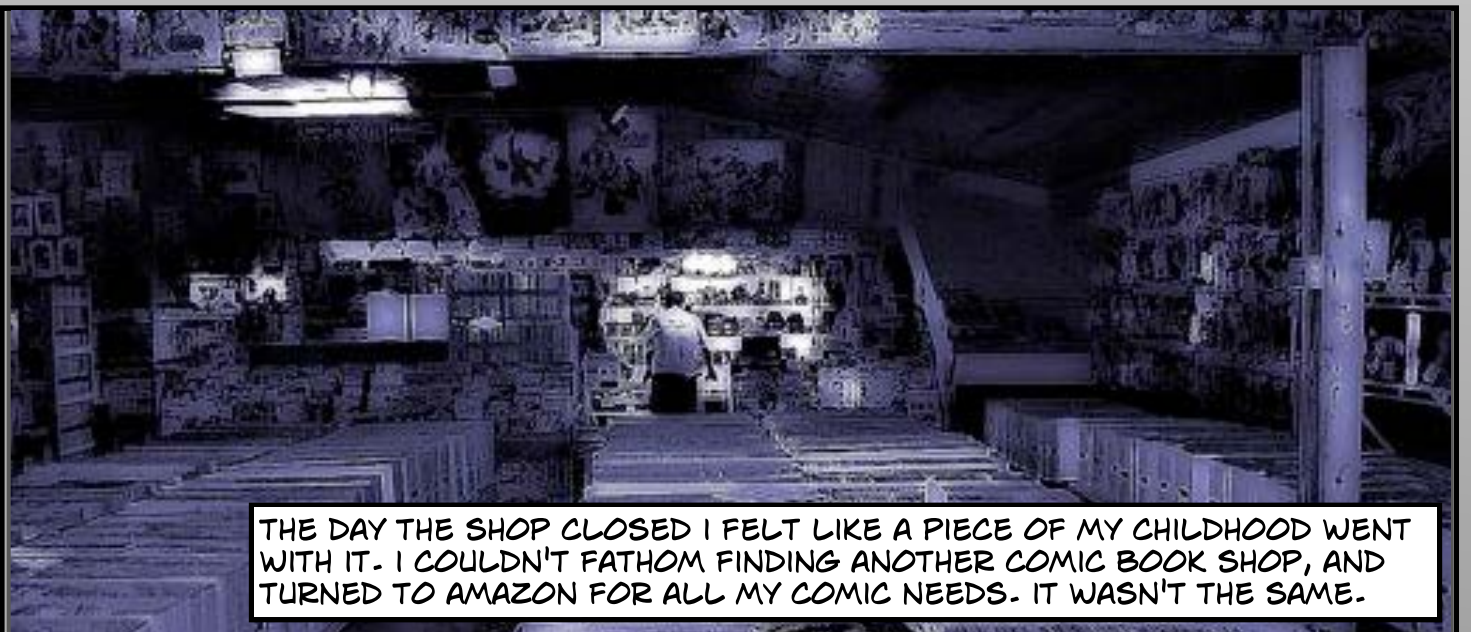




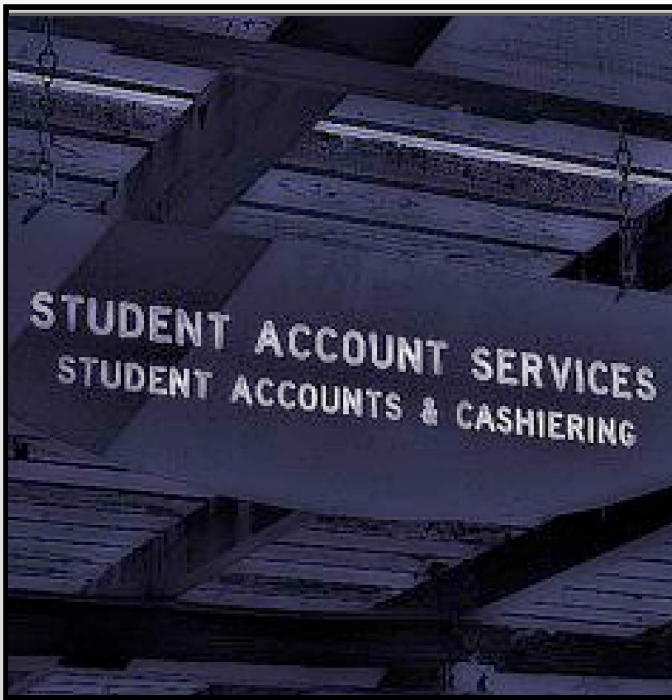
I WOULD RIDE THE BUS FOR AN HOUR AND A HALF TO VISIT JOHN, MY COMIC BOOK GUY, BECAUSE NEW ISSUES WERE IN THAT WE NEEDED TO READ AND DISCUSS.



HE GOT IT. HE UNDERSTOOD. TOO BAD NOT ENOUGH PEOPLE DID TO KEEP HIM IN BUSINESS.



THE DAY THE SHOP CLOSED I FELT LIKE A PIECE OF MY CHILDHOOD WENT WITH IT. I COULDN'T FATHOM FINDING ANOTHER COMIC BOOK SHOP, AND TURNED TO AMAZON FOR ALL MY COMIC NEEDS. IT WASN'T THE SAME.



CHOOSING COURSES AND FIGURING OUT A SCHEDULE IN UNIVERSITY WAS MY LEAST FAVOURITE ACTIVITY. I NEVER GOT THE CLASSES OR TEACHERS I WANTED, PLACES WERE ALWAYS SPREAD OUT ALL OVER AN UNFAMILIAR CAMPUS AND THE TERM "WAIT-LISTED" BECAME MY MORTAL ENEMY.



UNTIL ONE DAY, I WON. I BEAT THE SYSTEM. I FINALLY GOT INTO A CLASS THAT I HAD WANTED TO BE A PART OF FOR THREE YEARS. IT WAS CALLED *THE RHETORIC OF GRAPHIC NOVELS*. I WAS IN HEAVEN.



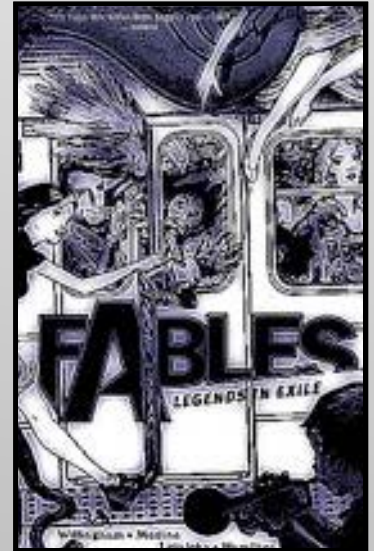


FOR THIS CLASS, YOUR TOTAL IS \$546.55. CASH, CREDIT OR BLOOD?



I DIDN'T CARE. AND I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHAT ANY OF MY OTHER CLASSES WERE THAT SEMESTER.

WE STARTED THE CLASS BY READING A COMIC BOOK, AND THE ENTIRE SEMESTER HAD ME SO EXCITED ABOUT THE RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENTATION POSSIBILITIES OF THIS WORLD THAT I LOVED SO MUCH THAT I DIDN'T WANT THE CLASS TO END.



ON TOP OF THE AMAZING SUBJECT MATTER, DR. JACOBS WAS INTELLIGENT, WITTY, FUNNY, ENGAGING, PERSONABLE, AND IN HIS ELEMENT. HE WAS WELL-VERSED IN THIS TOPIC AND MADE THE EXPLORATION OF GRAPHIC LITERATURE INCREDIBLY INTERESTING.



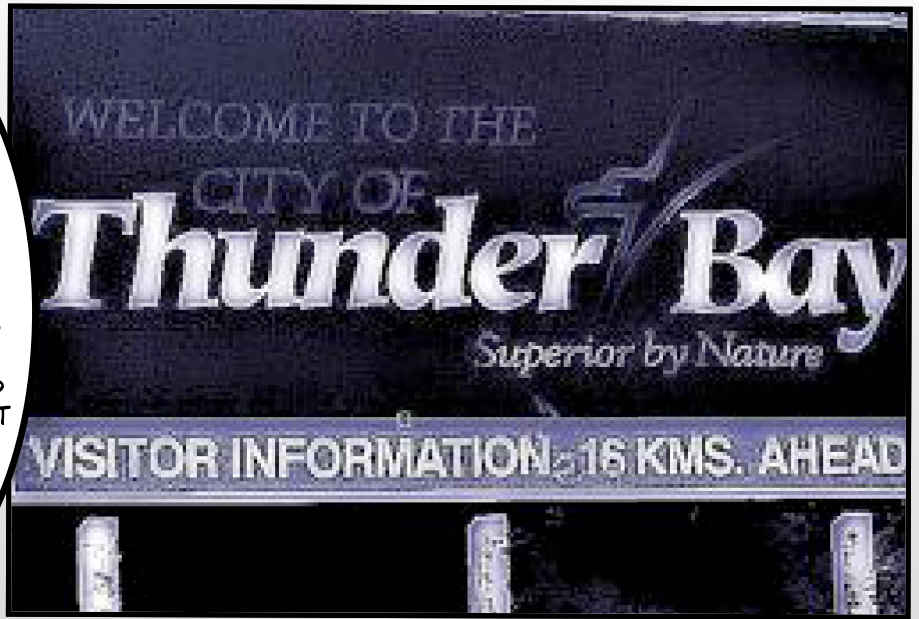
FEEL FREE TO STOP BY MY OFFICE ANY TIME FOR A CHAT!



BEGINNING AS A TEACHER-CANDIDATE



UPON COMPLETING MY DEGREE, I MOVED TO A NEW CITY TO BEGIN A BACHELOR OF EDUCATION PROGRAM, AND I THOUGHT I WOULD HAVE TO SIMPLY ENDURE THE COLD CITY FOR THE EIGHT MONTHS THAT I THOUGHT I WOULD BE THERE...



...INSTEAD, I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT.

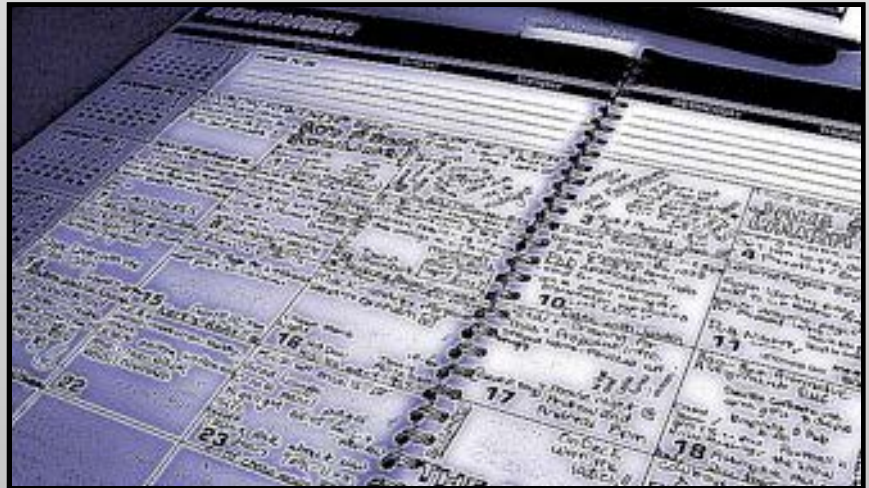
I EVEN DISCOVERED A NEW COMIC BOOK STORE. IT WASN'T THE SAME, AND I DIDN'T GET TO KNOW THE OWNER QUITE LIKE JOHN, BUT IT MET MY NEEDS AND KEPT ME HAPPILY READING.





MY PROFESSIONAL YEAR WASN'T EXACTLY WHAT I HAD EXPECTED. I HAD BEEN PREPARING FOR THIS PROGRAM SINCE I WAS 12 YEARS OLD: VOLUNTEERING AT SCHOOLS, FAST-TRACKING HIGH SCHOOL, COMPLETING A FIVE MONTH CO-OP PLACEMENT, KEEPING MY GRADES UP IN UNDERGRAD TO BE ACCEPTED INTO A PROGRAM. OF COURSE, I HAD SOME PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE, BUT IN MY OPINION, THE PROGRAM QUICKLY FELL SHORT.

I FELT AS THOUGH WE WERE OVERLOADED WITH TOO MANY SHORT CLASSES, AND NOT GIVEN THE CHANCE TO BECOME ENGAGED IN ANY ONE TOPIC. CLASSES WERE FILLED WITH 'BUSY WORK', BUT MANY OF US FELT AS THOUGH WE WEREN'T BEING TAUGHT THE SKILLS WE NEEDED FOR OUR QUICKLY APPROACHING CLASSROOM PLACEMENTS. THIS CONCEPT DOMINATED ALMOST ALL CONVERSATIONS I HAD, BECAUSE MANY OF MY FELLOW CLASSMATES HAD THE SAME QUESTIONS AS ME...



WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH **TEACHING?**

WHY AREN'T WE LEARNING ANYTHING **PRACTICAL?**

WHY DO I STILL FEEL SO **UNPREPARED** FOR PLACEMENT?



BEFORE I KNEW IT, MY FIRST PLACEMENT HAD ARRIVED. I FELT ANXIOUS AND NERVOUS BUT TRIED TO PUT ON A BRAVE FACE. MY SUPERVISOR PUT ME RIGHT AT EASE ON THE FIRST DAY.



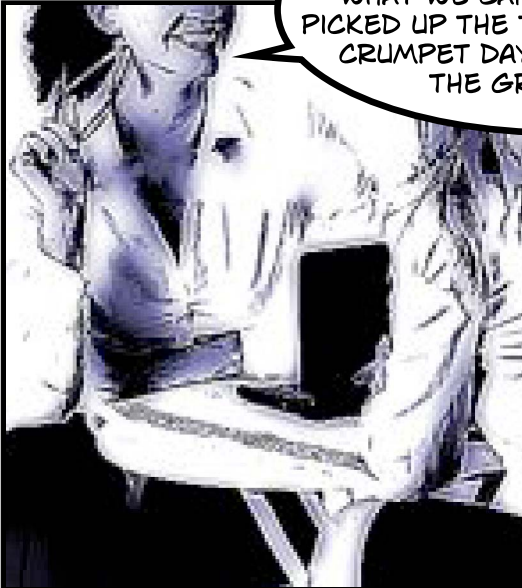
HI! I'M LAURIE FOSTER!



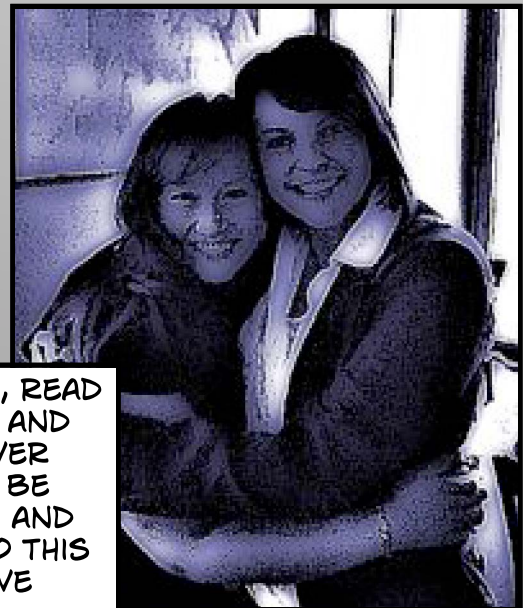
IT WAS CLEAR THAT MRS. FOSTER HAD A PASSION FOR TEACHING. SHE WAS RESPECTED BY HER STUDENTS, CONTINUALLY CHANGED HER LESSONS TO SUIT HER CLASS, AND WORKED HARD TO STAY INNOVATIVE, CREATIVE AND ORIGINAL. **SHE REMINDED ME OF WHY I GOT INTO TEACHING.**

YESTERDAY'S LESSON TANKED! LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT WE CAN CHANGE. ALSO, I PICKED UP THE TREATS FOR TEA AND CRUMPET DAY TOMORROW WITH THE GRADE 11'S...

MS...CAN WE DO LITERATURE CIRCLES AGAIN?



WHY DO YOU THINK BOO RADLEY COVERED SCOUT AS SHE WATCHED THE FIRE?



DURING THIS PLACEMENT, I GOT LITTLE SLEEP, READ FIVE NOVELS AND TWO SHAKESPEARE PLAYS, AND LEARNED MORE ABOUT TEACHING THAN I EVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE. I WAS FORTUNATE TO BE PLACED WITH ONE OF THE MOST PASSIONATE AND INSPIRATIONAL TEACHERS I HAVE EVER MET. TO THIS DAY, SHE IS MY ROLE MODEL FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING.

I LEARNED A LOT UNDER HER DIRECTION, BUT ONE DAY, I CAUGHT MYSELF DOING SOMETHING I **SWORE** I WOULD NEVER DO...



LEAH!
PUT AWAY
TWILIGHT AND TAKE
OUT TO KILL A
MOCKINGBIRD!



UGHH! BUT
IT'S SO
BOOORING!

I APOLOGIZED AND MADE THE NEXT CLASS A FUN CAFE-STYLE FREE-READING PERIOD.



I KNEW THAT MY ASSOCIATE TEACHER WOULD ALLOW THIS CHANGE BECAUSE SHE EXPLAINED THE VALUE OF GIVING STUDENTS RECREATIONAL READING TIME DURING MY FIRST WEEK OF OBSERVATION.

I ASKED LEAH TO COME TO MY DESK AT THE END OF CLASS.



I STARTED TALKING TO HER ABOUT THE BOOK SHE WAS READING AND SUDDENLY THIS SHY, QUIET GIRL WAS FILLED WITH A PASSION FOR LITERATURE THAT I HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE.

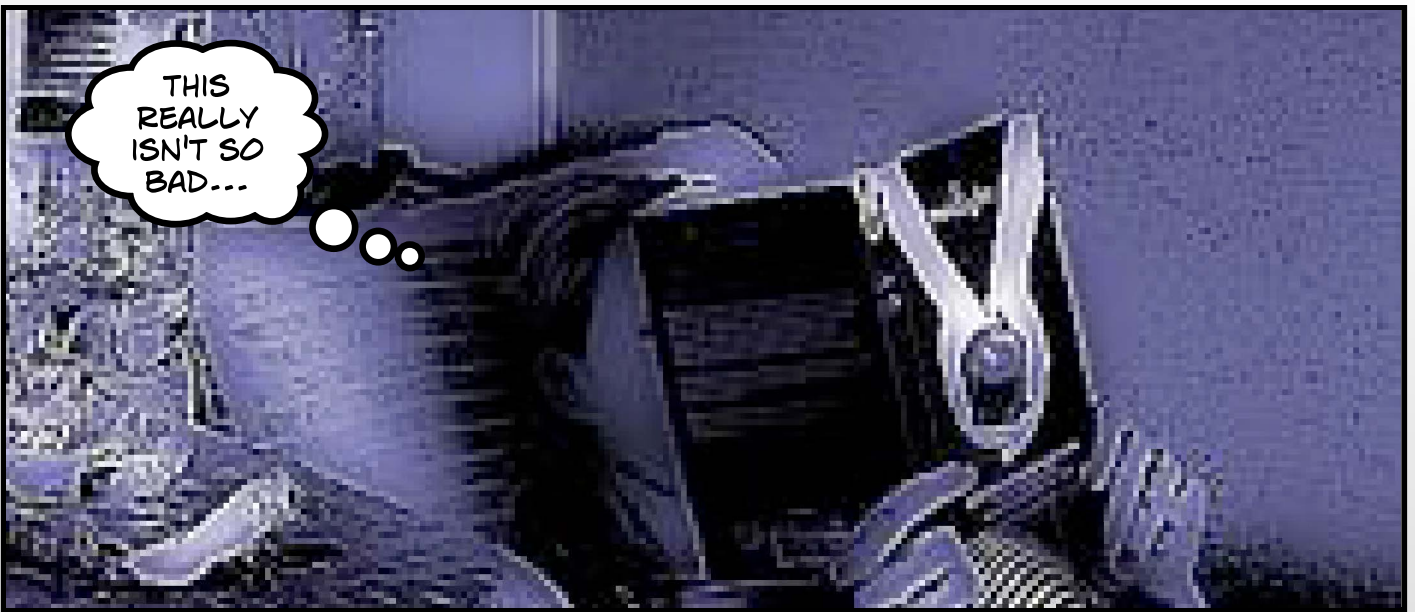


WHY DO YOU LIKE IT SO MUCH?



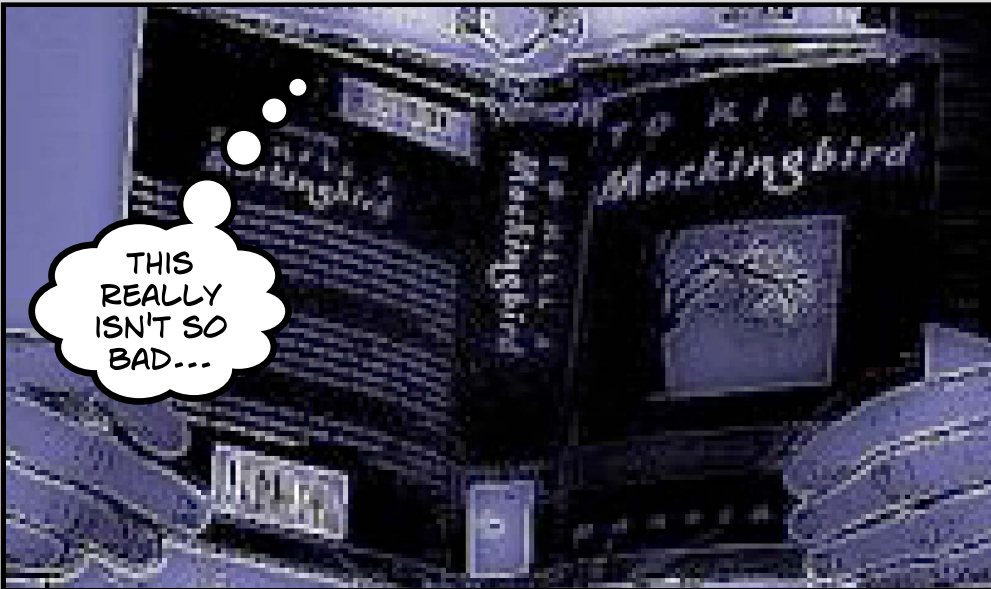
OH MAN, IT'S JUST SO GREAT AND EDWARD LOVES BELLA SO MUCH AND....

HER ENTHUSIASM WAS ASTONISHING. SHE COULD BARELY CONTAIN HERSELF.

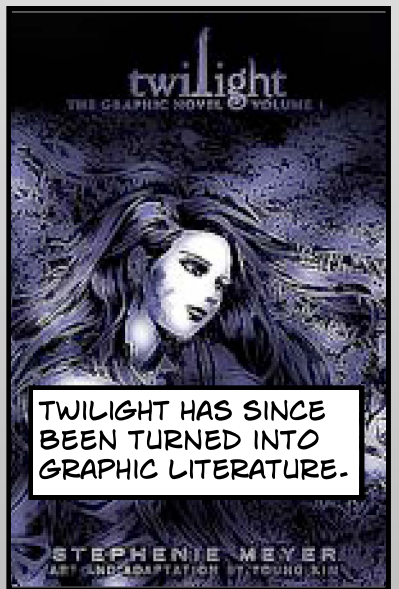


THIS REALLY ISN'T SO BAD...

ONCE I READ IT, WE SPOKE FOR A FEW MINUTES AFTER EACH CLASS. SHE SUDDENLY BECAME MORE INTERESTED IN THE CLASS READINGS. WE HAD FINALLY ESTABLISHED SOME COMMON GROUND AS WE GAVE EACH OTHERS' LITERATURE A CHANCE.



THIS REALLY ISN'T SO BAD...



TWILIGHT HAS SINCE BEEN TURNED INTO GRAPHIC LITERATURE.



BY GIVING MY STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO OCCASIONALLY READ SOMETHING THEY LIKE, THEY DISCOVERED THAT READING **CAN** BE AN ENJOYABLE EXPERIENCE, WHICH I LEARNED DURING THE FREE-READING CAFE. I ALSO LEARNED THAT IN THE CONTEXT OF AN ENGLISH CLASS, STUDENTS RESPONDED VERY WELL TO HAVING CHOICE.

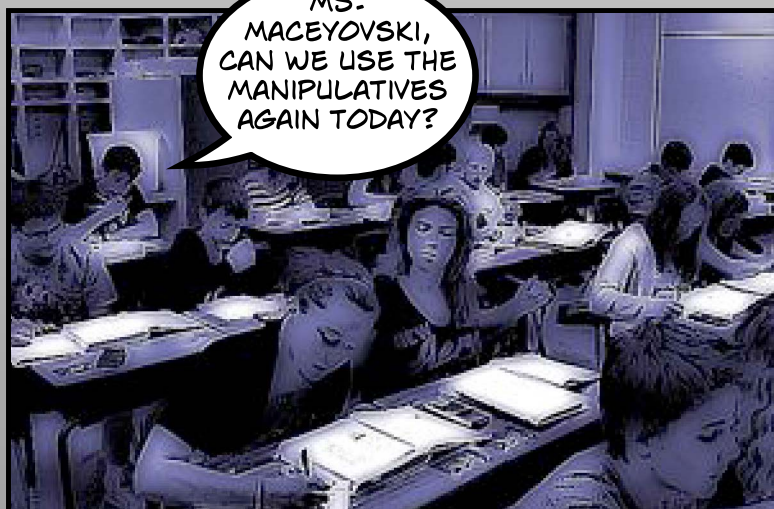
THREE YEARS LATER, MRS. FOSTER INVITED ME TO CREATE A PRESENTATION ON GRAPHIC NOVELS TO SHOW HER GRADE 10 CLASS HOW TO USE A GRAPHIC VERSION OF **MACBETH** TO HELP THEM LEARN SHAKESPEARE. I WAS HONOURED, AND THE STUDENTS WERE EXCITED TO READ "**BORING SHAKESPEARE**" IN A NEW WAY.

WHEN I WAS GIVEN A MATH CLASS FOR SECOND PLACEMENT, I WAS DISAPPOINTED THAT I WOULD NOT LEARN MORE ABOUT BEING A LITERACY TEACHER. WHAT I DID NOT REALIZE, WAS THAT I WAS STILL LEARNING A LOT ABOUT JUST *BEING A TEACHER.*

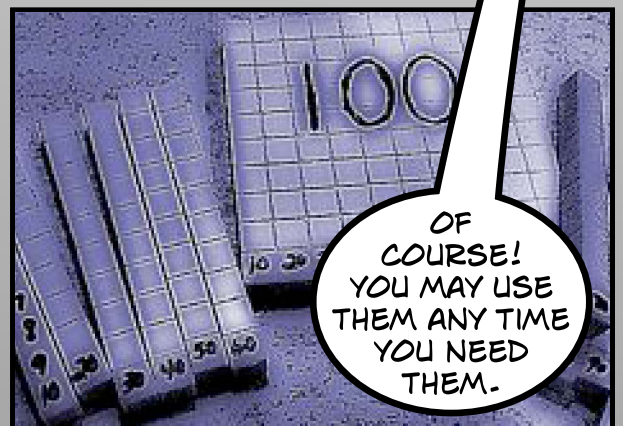


I LEARNED A GREAT DEAL FROM MY FIRST PLACEMENT THAT I USED DURING MY SECOND: A BELIEF IN THE NEED TO REFLECT ON AND MODIFY LESSONS; AN OPENNESS TO STUDENT CHOICE; A NEED AND ABILITY TO WORK HARD; THE COMMITMENT TO CONNECT WITH STUDENTS.

ALTHOUGH I WAS NOT TEACHING LITERACY, I WAS STILL PRACTICING MY BELIEFS, ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES. I WAS ALSO GIVEN MORE "ALONE TIME" TO TEACH STUDENTS AND MANAGE THE CLASSROOM ON MY OWN, WHICH HELPED BUILD MY CONFIDENCE AND STRENGTHEN MY UNDERSTANDING OF MY TEACHER IDENTITY.



MS. MACEYOVSKI, CAN WE USE THE MANIPULATIVES AGAIN TODAY?



OF COURSE! YOU MAY USE THEM ANY TIME YOU NEED THEM.

GRADUATE STUDIES

WHEN I MOVED BACK TO THUNDER BAY TO BEGIN GRADUATE STUDIES, SEVERAL TEACHERS OPENED MY EYES TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MY OWN TEACHING PEDAGOGY. I WISHED THAT CLASSES SUCH AS "LIFELONG LEARNING," AND "CRITICAL PEDAGOGY" HAD BEEN OFFERED DURING MY PROFESSIONAL YEAR.

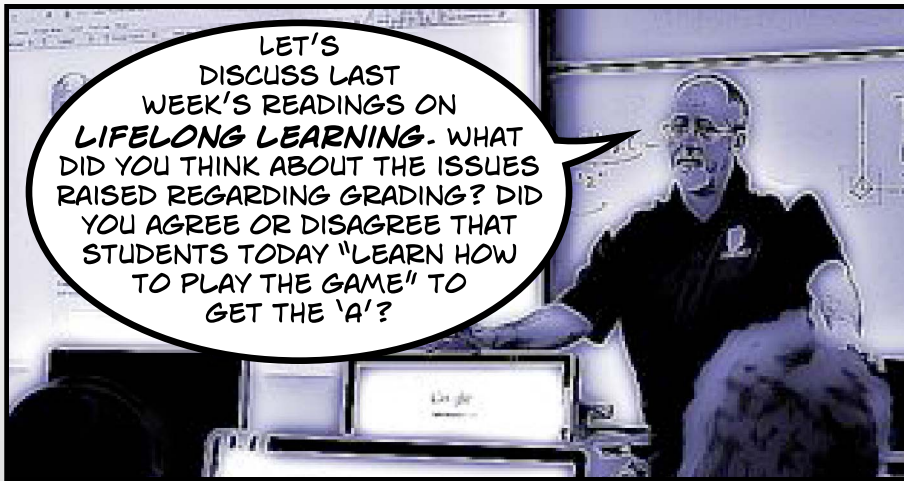


INSTEAD OF THE FRUSTRATION OF 10 CLASSES PER TERM THAT THRUST BUSY WORK AND GROUP ASSIGNMENTS ON THE STUDENTS, GRADUATE STUDIES FOSTERED A CRITICAL LEARNING AND SHARING ENVIRONMENT THAT INCLUDED FEWER, MORE IN-DEPTH COURSES FULL OF THOUGHTFUL READINGS AND A CHANCE TO BE A PART OF AN EDUCATIONAL DIALOGUE.

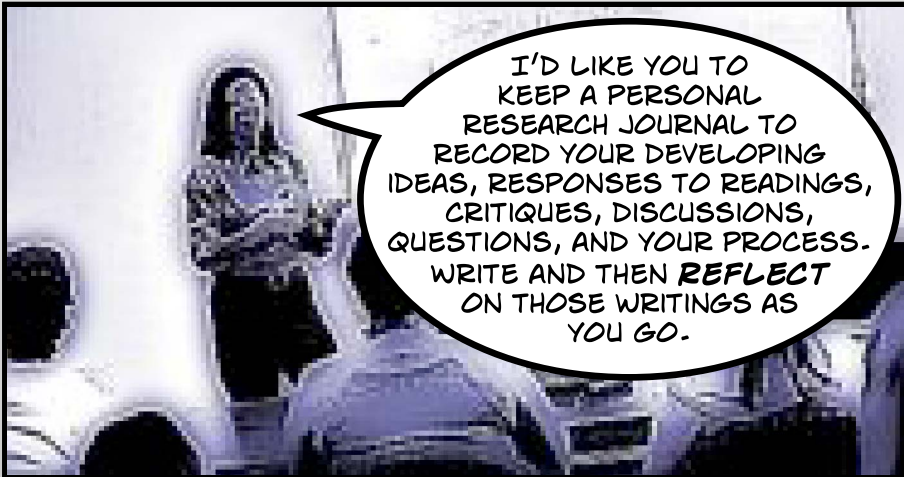


THIS CONCEPT WAS SO FOREIGN TO ME AFTER YEARS OF LECTURE HALL CLASSES THAT I BEGAN TO APPRECIATE MY FELLOW COLLEAGUES' CRITIQUES, AND FORM MY OWN OPINIONS ABOUT TEACHING, LEARNING, RESEARCH, AND LITERACY.





LET'S DISCUSS LAST WEEK'S READINGS ON **LIFELONG LEARNING**. WHAT DID YOU THINK ABOUT THE ISSUES RAISED REGARDING GRADING? DID YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE THAT STUDENTS TODAY "LEARN HOW TO PLAY THE GAME" TO GET THE 'A'?



I'D LIKE YOU TO KEEP A PERSONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL TO RECORD YOUR DEVELOPING IDEAS, RESPONSES TO READINGS, CRITIQUES, DISCUSSIONS, QUESTIONS, AND YOUR PROCESS. WRITE AND THEN **REFLECT** ON THOSE WRITINGS AS YOU GO.



CREATE AN INDIVIDUAL 'EDUCATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY' ABOUT YOUR OWN BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOLING AND EDUCATION, TEACHING, LEARNING AND LIVING. TALK ABOUT **YOUR PASSION**. USE ANY FORMAT YOU'D LIKE.



IN YOUR FINAL PAPER, I WOULD LIKE YOU TO DISCUSS YOUR **IDENTITY AS A 'LITERATE BEING'** AND WHAT THAT MEANS FOR YOUR FUTURE TEACHING CAREER.



I WAS IN HEAVEN.

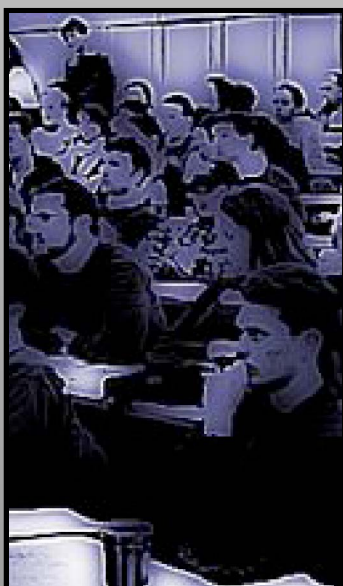
ALL OF THESE CHOICES AND CONCEPTS WERE INFORMING MY TEACHER IDENTITY.



ALL OF A SUDDEN, I WAS ALLOWED THIS NEW FREEDOM, CHOOSING A TOPIC I WAS INTERESTED IN AND READING ABOUT IT, WRITING ABOUT IT, PRESENTING ABOUT IT. I REDISCOVERED MY LOVE FOR GRAPHIC LITERATURE AND GAINED A WHOLE NEW RESPECT FOR THE MEDIUM. I BEGAN RESEARCHING EVERYTHING I COULD ABOUT THIS TOPIC, INCLUDING ALL OF THE AMAZING CLASSIC LITERATURE THAT HAS BEEN ADAPTED TO GRAPHIC FORM, AND WAS SURPRISED TO FIND AN UNTAPPED WORLD OF POSSIBLE TEACHER RESOURCES.

I CONTINUED THIS RESEARCH THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, AND PRESENTED MY FINDINGS A FEW MORE TIMES IN VARIOUS CLASSES, AS WELL AS TO PRESERVICE TEACHERS.

I BEGAN TO REALIZE THAT MY LOVE OF GRAPHIC LITERATURE IS SHARED BY MANY, BUT ALSO MISUNDERSTOOD.



ALTHOUGH I RECEIVED FANTASTIC FEEDBACK FROM YOUNG ASPIRING TEACHERS WILLING TO TRY TO IMPLEMENT GRAPHIC NOVELS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS, I DISCOVERED THAT THE NEGATIVE STIGMAS REGARDING THE MEDIUM WERE STILL PRESENT.

THE MORE I READ, RESEARCHED, LEARNED AND PRESENTED, THE MORE PASSIONATE I BECAME ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN CLOSE TO MY HEART.



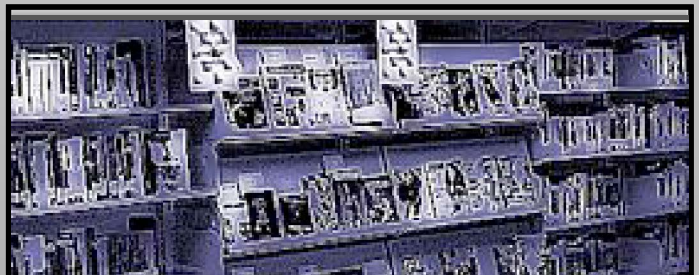
PROMOTING LITERACY THROUGH MULTIMODALITY



Holy, Graphic Novels, Batman!



I have been reading comic books and graphic novels since I was young, and have been interested in the benefits of reading graphic novels in schools for the last few years. Many contributions to this particular field of research have been in part by Dr. Dale Jacobs, who was my professor at the University of Windsor and sparked my interest in the multimodality of comics.



FINDING SOMETHING TO BE PASSIONATE ABOUT PLAYS A HUGE ROLE IN ANY TEACHER'S CAREER. I BELIEVE THAT PASSION IS THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTIC OF A GOOD TEACHER, AND MY PASSION FOR PROMOTING GRAPHIC LITERACY HAS LED ME TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE MEDIUM, AS WELL AS DEVELOP A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF MYSELF IN RELATION TO MY STUDENTS. THESE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH GRAPHIC LITERATURE SHAPED MY LITERATE IDENTITY, WHICH IN TURN INFORMED MY IDENTITY AS A TEACHER. THESE ASPECTS OF MY LITERATE IDENTITY AND TEACHER IDENTITY WILL BE EXPLORED IN THE EXEGESIS.

MY TEACHER IDENTITY HAS BEEN SHAPED THROUGH MANY EXPERIENCES IN MY LIFE. THIS NOVELLA HAS BEEN A SMALL WINDOW INTO THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS THAT HAVE LED ME TO BE THE PASSIONATE TEACHER THAT I AM. MY LOVE OF SUPERHEROES LED ME TO A THIRST FOR READING, WHICH DROVE MY LOVE OF ENGLISH AND PROVIDED ME WITH THE SKILLS I NEEDED TO EXCEL IN SCHOOL. ONE INCREDIBLY INFLUENTIAL CLASS AND PROFESSOR SPARKED MY INTEREST IN TAKING THE IDEA FURTHER, WHILE GRADUATE STUDIES SOLIDIFIED MY PASSION FOR THIS SUBJECT MATTER, AS WELL AS FOR TEACHING.



NOW I CAN ASK MYSELF, WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

ONCE ONE CAN IDENTIFY WITH, AND UNDERSTAND, ONE'S OWN SPECIFIC TEACHER IDENTITY, ONE GAINS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW ONE'S OWN PERSONAL HISTORY WILL AFFECT ONE'S TEACHING. BY UNDERSTANDING WHAT FACTORS IN MY LIFE SHAPED MY OWN LITERATE IDENTITY, AS WELL AS MY PLACE WITHIN A CLASSROOM, I CAN BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT CAN HELP SHAPE MY STUDENTS' LITERATE IDENTITIES.

THIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCE WILL GREATLY INFLUENCE MY TEACHING BY MAKING ME MORE AWARE OF THE BENEFITS OF VISUAL AND GRAPHIC LITERACY, AND THUS MORE WILLING TO IMPLEMENT THEM IN MY CLASSROOM. I ALSO SEE THE BENEFITS TO AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION, AND WILL INCORPORATE SELF-REFLECTION WHEREVER POSSIBLE. SINCE I AM NOW AWARE OF WHERE MY OWN PASSION COMES FROM, I WILL TRY TO INTEGRATE VISUAL AND GRAPHIC LITERACY WHEREVER I CAN, WHICH WILL IN TURN FEED THE FLAMES OF MY PASSIONATE TEACHING.

THE CREATION OF THIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GRAPHIC NOVELLA HAS GREATLY FACILITATED THE DEVELOPMENT OF MY TEACHER IDENTITY, WHICH I DISCUSS FURTHER IN THE EXEGESIS. CREATING THIS NOVELLA TAUGHT ME MORE ABOUT MY LITERATE IDENTITY AS WELL AS MY TEACHER IDENTITY THAN I EVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE.



I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR TAKING THIS JOURNEY WITH ME. SELF-REFLECTION IS NEVER EASY, BUT I LEARNED A LOT ABOUT MYSELF THROUGH THIS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ADVENTURE, AND EVEN MORE ABOUT THE KIND OF TEACHER I HOPE TO BE. I ENCOURAGE ALL TEACHERS TO CONSIDER PROMOTING VISUAL AND GRAPHIC LITERACY IN THEIR TRAVELS. I ALSO ENCOURAGE ALL TEACHERS TO CONSIDER THINKING ABOUT WHAT MAKES THEM PASSIONATE.



EXEGESIS

The research process involved in creating my graphic novella was a challenging yet enlightening journey; the self-reflective process taught me more about myself, my past, my literate identity, my academic identity and my teacher identity than I ever thought possible. Varghese, Morgan, Johnston and Johnston (2005) argue that in order to understand language teaching and learning we “need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them” (p. 22). The process of discovering my own identity began with my literate identity, which was greatly influenced by graphic literacy.

My love of graphic literacy and the support I was given throughout my life and in my research career contributed to my passion as a beginning literacy teacher. As mentioned in the literature review, Wenger (1998) notes that identities are formed amid the “tension between our investment in the various forms of belonging and our ability to negotiate the meanings that matter in those contexts” (p. 188). My ability to negotiate meaning from my experiences through the creation of the graphic novella has greatly informed my understanding of my teacher identity formation. I believe having a greater understanding of my existing teacher identity will positively influence my future experiences as a teacher by keeping me aware of my values, beliefs, influences, and limitations.

In the beginning of this study, I asked myself the following research questions: what are the influences on my development as a literate human being?; what were/are the influences on my emerging identity as a secondary English teacher?; how did graphic

novels inform the development of my identities?; what is the nature and potential of graphic novels for engaging students in literacy learning in secondary English classrooms?; and how does the process of creating a graphic autobiography facilitate the development of one's teacher identity? This exegesis will integrate each question into the text by taking a critical look at myself through the lens of the themes that emerged through the creation of the graphic novella: childhood/adolescence, teacher candidacy, and graduate studies. This exegesis is organized into several sections. I begin by exploring the themes that emerged from the novella. Secondly, I examine critically my emerging understandings of my future role as a secondary English teacher. I conclude by reflecting on the process of self-study and the process of creating the graphic novella.

Graphic Novella Themes

Upon completion of the graphic novella, I reflected critically on the experiences throughout my life that contributed to my literate identity, my teacher identity and my values, beliefs, influences and limitations as a beginning teacher. Below, I explore each theme: childhood/adolescence, teacher candidacy, and graduate studies.

Childhood/Adolescence

In the novella, it is apparent that my appetite for exploring and reading the medium of superhero comics began at an early age. This appetite was based primarily on my passion for literature and thrived because of parental encouragement and support (both financially and academically). Although I am unaware when my appetite for the superhero medium began, I am certain that it contributed to my success in academic accomplishments throughout school and informed my literate identity as a student. This is consistent with Vasudevan, Schultz and Batement (2010) who found that student's out-

of-school literacy practices influence students' literate identities. However, at the time, I struggled with the notion that superhero literature was gendered (Chelton, 2006; Horton, 2005; Krashen, 2004); it was presented as material for boys, and schoolyard teasing almost deflated my passion for the medium.

For years, I battled the judgemental comments and questioning stares from those around me when they discovered my choice of reading material. Even though I considered myself to be an avid and strong reader, I did not understand why people around me kept trying to direct my reading into other genres. I kept thinking that reading is reading, regardless of the content or form: "No, I do not relate to *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 1908) or identify with Laura from *Little House on the Prairie* (Ingalls Wilder, 1994). I would much rather read about how Bruce Wayne or Clark Kent plan on saving the world this week." In the formation of my ever-evolving gender identity, negative societal feedback ultimately led to self-acceptance and transcending social barriers related to gender roles. Overcoming pressures to adhere to gender stereotypes (Sultana, 2011) in my chosen literature through parental acceptance and support carried over to other aspects of my social identity, such as sports. Gender construction, gender identity, and gender roles (Holt & Ellis, 1998) all played integral parts in the development of my literate and teacher identities. This study suggests that gender stereotyping about who reads comics negatively influences girls as well as boys.

In relation to my teacher identity, I now have a better understanding of the culture-driven gender roles placed on students (Sultana, 2011), and as a teacher, I will use my experiences to drive my consideration of gender roles (Sultana, 2011) and how they function in my own classroom; I will never discourage reading because a student chose

“boy material” or *“girl material.”* As an adolescent, I made the choice to continue reading what I enjoy, and to ignore societal and social stigmas. My commitment to this decision helped inform my identity as a student, reader and literate being. Meeus (2011) found that commitment, or the “degree to which adolescents have made choices in important identity domains, is a key variable in adolescent development” (p. 77). This particular decision impacted my development as an adolescent, which, in turn, led to the development of my literate identity, and eventually, my teacher identity.

The transition from adolescence to young womanhood as a university student also contributed to my literate identity, due to the insight into, and affirmation of, the comics medium through my course with Dr. Dale Jacobs. His course offered my first introduction to presenting comics as multimodal literacy, and informed my understandings of comics as a beneficial resource for literacy teachers.

Teacher Candidacy

Kosnik and Beck (2008) discuss the impact of a preservice teacher education program on the practices of beginning teachers:

A recurring puzzle concerns how much we can actually teach student teachers. Can we fully prepare them for the realities of teaching? Can we give them a guaranteed way to develop their literacy program and launch it in September? The answer is probably no. Often, we find student teachers and beginning teachers somewhat unrealistic in their expectations for preservice programs. As we analyze the third-year interviews, we see great progress in all aspects of their work and we know that developing the skills of being a teacher takes time. However, we also believe we could equip them better than we do for the difficult early years of teaching. Finding the balance is not simple. (p. 124)

In the novella, the experiences that most shaped my teacher identity began with the teacher education program. Although I had expectations and ideas about my future teacher identity, many of those ideas were changed and molded through my experiences

as a teacher candidate. My expectations for development by the end of the program included: having a comprehensive understanding of curriculum, lesson and unit planning, practical classroom management, organization and assessment strategies, how to foster a critical thinking environment, effective teaching pedagogies, professional identity construction, and how to be a passionate and fair teacher. Although some classes touched briefly on each topic, I still felt unprepared and ill-equipped to enter a placement. This is consistent with Kosnik, Beck, Cleovoulou and Fletcher (2009) who found that teachers might need to be in their third year of teaching before they are able to understand how their initial teacher preparation actually did impact their actions and attitudes as teachers.

In addition, upon entering the program, I found myself surrounded by colleagues who focused solely on the negative aspects of the program. These unconstructive attitudes influenced my opinions of the quality of education I was receiving. Entering my first placement with negative opinions of the program could have hindered my ability to be a confident student teacher, but my associate teacher, Laurie Foster, modeled what passionate teaching looked like by being innovative, creative and industrious. She demonstrated effective literacy teaching, dedication to student engagement and critical thinking, and true passion for both her field of expertise as well as the education profession. She solidified my beliefs about respectful treatment towards students, and illuminated how well students respond when given opportunities for engagement.

My experiences with one student, Leah, helped to shape my student-centered approach to teaching, and showed me the importance of relating and connecting to students. It also facilitated my beliefs regarding fairness, because it was what Leah required in order to be motivated to learn. The response I received from the students after

the café-style free-reading class illustrated for me the importance of giving students choice and incorporating their input into lessons.

My experiences during my second placement confirmed how my beliefs, values, understandings and philosophies about teaching are comprehensive, and continually developing. I brought my openness to student choice into my second placement classroom through hands-on learning using math manipulatives. Based on my experience of reaching out to Leah, I then attempted to connect with several other students during my second placement. By creating that connection with her, I discovered that forming a relationship with students has the potential to positively impact their learning.

Through the creation of, and reflection on, the novella, I am now aware of the unrealistic expectations that I had entering the teacher education program. I had idealistic hopes that an eight-month program would make me feel prepared and confident in my teaching ability. I felt as though the academic in-course component of the program was insufficient, rushed, and lacking in content. During, and even after completion of the program, I felt disappointed that I was not being given practical advice, without realizing that I was being given practical advice, I was just unaware of the form it came in.

Throughout my teacher education program, I was learning both what to do and what practices I would avoid in the future. I was prepared for placement (even though it might not have felt that way) because it was a successful and educational experience. Only through the creation of my graphic novella was I able to understand what I *did* learn from the classes, and how my experiences during placement helped to shape my teacher identity. Without the creation of my novella, it might have taken years before I realized the impact of the program, just as Kosnik, Beck, Cleovoulou and Fletcher (2009) suggest.

Upon reflection on her own identity as a literacy teacher educator, Leslie (2010) questions whether or not the one-year model of teacher preparation needs to be extended or modified to build in more time for in-course teaching and learning. Leslie explains:

Placement of the second practicum at the end of classes, with no follow-up, means that some students depart the program with questions and/or misunderstandings about teaching. Solutions to this dilemma might easily be found if teacher educators work together to consider options and examine past and/or alternative models. (p. 292)

It was my experience that ending the professional year with a placement with no final reflection or follow-up left me feeling particularly “at loose ends,” disappointed and unprepared for the identity shift from student to teacher. When it should have been the most pivotal time in my identity formation as a teacher, I felt as though I were being “rushed” out of the system and thrust into an entirely new identity, left to navigate a new identity without adequate tools.

Darling-Hammond (2006) explains that schools of education should resist “watering down” teacher preparation, and that improving teacher education and teaching “depends on not only strengthening individual programs but also addressing the policies needed to strengthen the teacher education enterprise as a whole” (p. 13). Teacher education should be pivotal in helping to shape individual teacher identity, especially at the end of a program when preservice teachers are shifting and constructing their own identities as beginning teachers (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Trent, 2011). Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that programs should “help teachers develop the disposition to continue to seek answers to difficult problems of teaching and learning and the skills to learn from practice (and from their colleagues) as well as to learn for practice” (p. 5). Ideally, programs should help student teachers to reflect on their experiences both as students and

as preservice teachers in order for them to create a confident and well-rounded novice teacher identity. Upon completion of the program, I had not developed a vision (Kosnik & Beck, 2009) and what this would mean in my early years of teaching, and how such a vision might have informed and sustained my continuing professional development. Nor did I develop the dispositions to “seek answers” to the challenges I would encounter as a professional (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Upon reflection of my understandings after completion of the teacher education program, I believe I also lacked a general teaching approach/philosophy, and my content and pedagogical knowledge of English, literacy teaching and learning was largely fragmented. Kosnick and Beck (2009) describe fragmentation as one of the problems with teachers’ philosophies; teachers’ “components are realistic in a sense but they cannot be implemented in isolation. For example, the ideal of ‘engaging’ students (and so having them become ‘life-long learners’) may be unattainable because the curriculum is not related to student’s interests” (p. 115-6). They note that fragmentation is a longstanding problem in pre-service education, due partly to a separation between subdisciplines of education, but also to the way pre-service programs are structured. This fragmentation “greatly hinders student teachers in understanding the key elements of teaching and weaving them together into the coherent pedagogical approach” (p. 9). They assert that in order for a pre-service program to be effective, the various faculty, supervisors, and mentor teachers must work together – and with the student teachers – to refine and integrate the priorities of teaching. Although I had several positive experiences with mentor teachers, I found many key elements of teaching were not addressed in a way that allowed me to weave together a coherent pedagogical approach. This partial

understanding of a teaching pedagogy underscore my ill-preparedness and lack of vision for teaching.

While I did not feel like an adequate or qualified teacher after only eight months of a teacher education program, graduate studies helped me further solidify my developing understandings of content and pedagogies (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). It was not until then that I began to formulate a theoretical framework for literacy teaching and learning.

Graduate Studies

Fried (1995) believes that “students need [teachers], not because we have all the answers, but because we can help them discover the right questions” (p. 29). Graduate studies helped me develop the ‘right questions’ during the transition from teacher candidate to teacher. Questioning and reflecting on my past teaching experiences through the creation of the novella had a meaningful impact in helping to further develop my teacher identity, and contributed to my emerging understandings of my role as a teacher.

The most influential aspect of graduate studies for me was the courses. Coursework in courses such as *Critical Pedagogy*, *Lifelong Learning*, and *Curriculum Studies in Language Arts* enabled me to develop my own substantive and pedagogical knowledge about teaching, learning, and literacy. During *Critical Pedagogy*, I was introduced to the influences of gender, race, class, and “white privilege” (Hays & Chang, 2003) on curriculum planning and teaching. This knowledge illuminated my conceptualization of gender and diversity; it led to my reflections on how gender stereotypes in the comics medium affected my childhood and literate identity, and this realization will influence my effort to avoid stereotypical gendered literature in my future

classroom. It also reminded me of the privileges afforded to me from a young age because of my race (Hays & Chang, 2003) that provided many opportunities I might not have had otherwise; and this understanding will influence my compassion and consideration towards future students.

It was not until graduate studies that I began to appreciate how uncritical I had been of the comics medium. I did not, until recently, begin to consider issues of gender, race and power embedded in some examples of the medium. McNeil (2010) discusses gendered literature on homosexuality, uses a critical lens to review LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) texts, and highlights the under-representation and use of LGBTQ resources in classrooms and libraries. She considers a broad range of issues related to the selection and teaching of literature relevant to LGBTQ adolescents and how literature relates to social justice and equity. McNeil asserts that classrooms and libraries are “pivotal places from which to disrupt the well-entrenched traditional paradigm of treating students as if they existed outside the constructed categories of race, class and gender (broadly defined)” (p. 190).

One of the texts McNeil (2010) discusses is *Skim* (Tamaki, 2008), a graphic novel that teases out issues such as alienation, desire, sexuality, homophobia, social responsibility, and morality, that “are all relevant to adolescents and that should be explored in the context of intellectual freedom and guidance from teachers” (p. 193). After exploring several other texts, she found that through continuous critical engagement with LGBTQ-themed resources, “students can be invited to ask who wins and who loses when sexual minorities are stereotyped in literature, and to make text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections that challenge the status quo and the privileging of some

identities and not other” (p. 208-9). McNeil concludes that social justice for students who experience high levels of oppression because of the non-hegemonic, non-heterosexual identities, as well as for all who suffer, involves challenging oppression through critical selection, reading and teaching of literature. I plan to use critical selection in the choices I will make in my future classroom, as well as utilize texts such as *Skim* to further challenge identity oppression.

Hammet and Sanford (2008) note that generalizations of gender and gender stereotypes discourage “an in-depth examination of the issues, [and] a consideration of the impact of other social constructions such as class, race, or sexual orientation” (p. 13). They contend that educators must be aware of the values and beliefs that are implicit in the language they employ when describing issues of gender. It is important for educators to “unpack” assumptions and language surrounding gender, and to be critical of their selections of literature that affect the educational and sociocultural experiences of students (Hammet & Sanford, 2008; McNeil, 2010).

The reading and reflection throughout several graduate classes, as well as the scholarly work related to the thesis, enabled me to conceptualize my identity more deeply and to consider the implications for practice. The choices I was given during graduate classes modeled the proper use and effectiveness of this teaching strategy. This, in turn, illuminated my teaching pedagogy and will greatly contribute to my future teaching practices. The open discussions during class facilitated my understanding of content knowledge, as well as my understandings of pedagogical knowledge (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). The independent research required of a directed study course led to my discovery of extensive resources that might be used to promote students’ engagement,

comprehension, written expression, visual literacy and understandings of critical literacy; these resources ignited my motivation to embrace researching the benefits of graphic literacy in the classroom.

Presenting to preservice teachers illuminated the diversity of views on the value of graphic literacy, and further ignited my passion for the subject. When given specific examples of how to address this medium, the preservice teachers were comfortable with the idea, and many candidates were even enthusiastic. It was affirming for me to hear from teacher candidates about their plans to implement visual literacy in their programs, and to watch them become excited about the vast resources now available for teachers to do just that. Graphic novels can be a valuable resource for students' engagement and response.

Upon reflection of the novella and my experiences through graduate studies, I understand that my values, beliefs, attitudes, approaches to interaction, and understandings about teaching have been shaped through the many experiences in my life. Throughout my time as a graduate student and researcher, I began to formulate a theoretical framework for literacy teaching and learning, and develop a deeper understanding of my beliefs and role as a secondary English teacher. I describe my emerging vision of my future role in the following section.

My Understandings of my Future role as a Secondary English teacher

Identity formation is a complex concept that is constantly evolving, shifting and growing. Hoffman-Kipp (2008) defines teacher identity as the “intersection of personal, pedagogical, and political participation and reflection within a larger sociopolitical context” (p. 153). Teacher identity is a critical component in the sociocultural and

sociopolitical intersections of classroom activity (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Hoffman-Kipp (2008) discuss several factors contributing to the development of teacher identity:

Given the active process of identity construction, I see teacher identity as a mix of values, beliefs, attitudes, approaches to interaction, and language that has been developed in personal realms (life history, family, community of origin) combined with understandings, pedagogical commitments and approaches, and routines of professional practice developed in teacher education programs and on the job (p.153).

Throughout this process, I have become more aware of some of the influences that have shaped my current teacher identity. I know that this identity will continue to change, shift and grow with each teaching experience. I am also aware of my influential role as teacher and role model, and recognize the challenges that are attached to that level of responsibility. Vision is also an important dimension of teaching (Kosnik & Beck, 2009).

Kosnik and Beck (2009) discuss the importance of teacher's *vision*, describing a philosophy of, or an approach to, teaching. They explain that the importance of a vision includes: keeping teachers aware of the full range of goals and processes of teaching; helping teachers see how the various aspects of teaching fit together; and helping teachers explain to students the purposes of schooling and particular classroom practices. They also note that a teaching vision is extensive, flexible and changeable, and although "a vision does point us in certain directions, we are free to act differently in a given situation and then perhaps modify the vision in light of the outcome" (p. 153).

My developing philosophy of education is based on a sociocultural constructivist approach (Courtland & Gambell, 2010) and reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978). Courtland and Gambell (2010) describe two approaches to literacy and multiliteracies teachings that are consistent with sociocultural constructivism and reader response:

readers'/writers' workshop and literature circles. I plan to use both approaches in conjunction with one another to encourage students: to read and respond to literary texts of their choice over a sustained period of time; to write about topics that are personally meaningful and of high interest; and to take different roles as they engage in the reading of texts. I shall also promote students' awareness of social justice issues through my selections of literacy content and the strategies I enact to promote students critical thinking and reading, awareness of issues of power and their capacity to promote social action (Lewison, Flint & Van Sluys, 2002).

In my role as a future teacher, I shall draw upon Kosnik and Beck's (2009) framework of subject content and pedagogical knowledge to address many decisions I will make as a teacher. For example, they advocate for student choice and the selection of relevant, interesting subject content and activities. They note, "apart from carefully selecting content for the whole class, we should help individual students find topics and activities that are engaging and important to them" (p. 115). They also suggest developing broad goals and principals for content selection, integrating subject teaching, and collaborating with other teachers. I plan on integrating student choice whenever possible. I believe literacy can be used cross-circularly and integrated with content subject matter to engage students, and that collaboration with colleagues is the best way to share ideas, expand resources and continue a literacy dialogue.

Moreover, Kosnik and Beck (2009) encourage teachers to pursue subject matter knowledge and an appreciation of their subjects throughout their career:

Too often teachers see themselves as having already mastered their subjects, or as knowing so much more about them than their students that further learning is unnecessary. However, there is no such thing as full mastery of a subject and the more we know about a subject the better our teaching will be. Further, as teachers

we need to model for our students continued fascination with a subject and strategies for ongoing learning. Moreover, if we make continued learning a priority in our lives we will find teaching more fulfilling. (p. 118)

I believe that my lifelong passion for literature, and more specifically visual and graphic literacy, has driving my passion and vision for teaching, and will continue to be ever-present in my teaching approaches throughout my career. Kosnik and Beck also note that in addition to teachers having content knowledge, they also “need subject-specific knowledge about child development, student needs and interests, typical student difficulties and misunderstandings, effective teaching strategies and activities, and available pedagogical materials” (p. 120). My subject-specific knowledge, although developed through teacher candidacy and graduate studies, will only flourish with experience.

In my role as a future secondary English teacher, I plan to use the following guidelines as criteria when researching and choosing graphic literacy texts:

- meeting curriculum standards
- appropriate language level
- attention to issues of race, class, gender and social justice in content
- credibility of content
- varied mix of canonical/non-canonical texts
- use of figurative language examples, relevance, and intertextuality.

Two examples of acclaimed graphic novels that I look forward to using in my future classroom are *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000/2003), and *Louis Riel: A comic strip biography* (Brown, 2003). *Persepolis* is an autobiographical story depicting childhood in Iran during and after the Islamic revolution. In his junior-level classroom study, Seyfried

(2008) found that *Persepolis* contained violent imagery, but since it is depicted in a less violent, cartoonish style, students “appreciated being trusted with mature content, which led to a greater investment in the class” (p. 45). I recognize that students will need to read and discuss critically the protagonist’s situatedness as someone of wealth whose experiences would not be similar to many other young women in the same country.

Louis Riel: A comic strip biography chronicles Riel’s resistance to the Canadian government’s mistreatment of the Métis community, in both 1869-70 and 1885, which resulted in the Métis’ military defeat. This text could be used to emphasize the importance of engaging students in the history of social justice issues of First Nations Aboriginals in Canada, as well as to promote cross-curricular learning (History and English curriculum).

I plan to use Bainbridge’s (2010) criteria for critical literacy as a guide for literacy teaching and learning. Her criteria include a set of questions designed to invite students to interrogate the assumptions embedded in texts. The questions can also help students to “understand their own assumptions and beliefs about the world, and help them to identify issues of fairness and social justice in the textual materials they encounter” (p. 95). Some of the questions include:

- Why did the author write this text?
- What voices are being heard?
- How are the (girls, boys, women, men, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, etc.) portrayed in this text?
- What is the world like for people in the text?
- Which people have power in this text?
- What is the author’s underlying message? (p. 95-96)

In order to foster critical reading in a classroom using *Persepolis*, I would scaffold students’ understanding of the culture, time period and issues in Iran through the use of

appropriate resources and opportunities for learning over a sustained period of time. The exploration of Iran and its culture, can help students critically examine their own attitudes about the country, which may be based on lack of knowledge and the media's portrayal of the country. Several examples of other useful graphic texts can be found in the Appendix. I am mindful that I need to balance my preferred medium for literature, graphic and visual, with my responsibility to introduce students to a wide range of media.

Courtland and Gambell (2010) note that a postmodern approach to literacy teaching and learning means that “educators must critically question the grand narratives that traditionally have undergirded the way we have defined literacy, the development of English language arts programs, resources and textbooks for teaching literacy, literacy teaching, and assessment” (p. 26). In other words, traditional visions of literacy need to be considered and reconsidered in the light of current literacy research.

Reflection

Self-reflection is a powerful process, and by looking into one's own childhood, adolescence, university and teaching career, one can discover what makes oneself the unique teacher one is (Hart, 1996; L'Abate, 2007). This study has extended the scholarly literature on autobiography into a unique approach to self-study through the creation of a novella in a graphic medium. I discovered many intricacies about my own specific identity while writing this novella, and just as I reflected on my own experiences to illuminate my identities, I reflected on my own writing as well as the process of creating the graphic piece. In creating this journey graphically, I hoped that visual meaning-making would resonate with readers and I hoped that readers could understand visual and

graphic literacy as a legitimate medium with significant potential to help students with many different aspects of their education.

The individual vignettes that I chose to use in my novella portray the most significant instances in the development of my literate and teacher identities. Without reflecting on them, creating a script, storyboarding them, finding images to portray emotion and arranging the instances into a story, I would not have been able to see them for the important moments they were.

Writing and illustrating were tools for discovery and reflection. It was the process of reflecting, communicating, writing, creating images, and storying my journey that made this experience so integral to discovering my teacher identity. I said on the last page of my novella “self-reflection is never easy.” The difficulty with the reflective process began with attempting to view my personal experiences objectively, and isolating particular situations that impacted me (both negatively and positively). After isolating these vignettes, I discovered *why* and *how* they impacted me by reflecting and writing about each one. The process of creating the graphic portion began after I had completed this phase.

Upon completion of the final draft, I spent time re-reading the work. The review of the literature as well as feedback I received along the way constituted a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) that informed my reflections. Without creating the graphic novella, I might not have been able to clearly see each experience’s meaning, or the powerful realizations of how each situation affected my current teacher identity. The creation of the graphic novella was imperative to giving me a deeper understanding of my teaching pedagogies.

The process was extensive and enlightening, as I discovered how literacy learning through the use of graphic novels can benefit both students and teachers; students can benefit in their reading comprehension, meaning-making skills, and critical thinking development, and teachers can gain a better understanding of their teacher identity through the creation of graphic media. I also discovered that my passion for graphic literacy helped spark my passion for literacy teaching, and I believe more passionate teachers are ultimately happier and more successful in their practices.

Throughout this process, I have gained increased consciousness about race, and how my situatedness as a privileged, white, female teacher can affect my choices in the classroom. This study has increased my awareness regarding the type of literature I will choose, and the importance of being critical of my selection of comics resources. I will be proactive in my attempt to represent as many races, cultures and social classes as possible, and will passionately continue my search for curriculum-rich graphic literacy that promotes social justice and critical reading/thinking.

Passion can help teachers define themselves as teachers, so much so that the “passionate activity comes to be so self-defining that it represents a central frame of one’s identity. For instance, those who have a passion for teaching do not merely say that they teach; they *are* teachers” (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008, p. 978). Each stage of life affects the next, and many experiences that occur in school help shape the adult lives and identities of students. Wisehart (2004) advises educators that

passionate teaching isn’t about correcting mistakes (although that is often part of it); it’s about honoring what students bring to the classroom; it’s about helping students demonstrate what they are learning and produce quality work; it’s about showing students how to reflect on their work and continue to improve. (p. 48)

Passion for literature informed my literate identity as a student, which in turn greatly influenced my identity as a lifelong learner, researcher, graduate student, writer, and beginning teacher. Passionate teaching involves having a thirst for going above and beyond what is expected, to create an educational space that is exciting, challenging and thought-provoking for students (Fried, 1995; Vallerand et al, 2003). Fried (1995) suggests that it is “what makes a teacher unforgettable” (p. 17), and believes that the “example we set as passionate adults allows us to connect to young people’s minds and spirits in a way that can have a lasting positive impact on their lives” (p. 19).

I became aware of the impact and benefit of multi-modal texts, as well as the reflective benefits of creating a multi-modal text. I will continue to advocate for the possibilities of strengthening students’ critical thinking skills through the use of graphic literacy, and continue to encourage teachers to take advantage of the vast resources available in literacy.

This process has also taught me that the development of my teaching pedagogies will continue to change over time, and by reflecting on my beliefs, values and practices, I can stay grounded in my beliefs, and be able to strengthen those beliefs throughout my career. Sexton (2008) notes that teacher identity development is an intricate combination of “social positioning, arrays of experience, and autobiographical understandings of teaching” (p. 86) that continue to grow throughout one’s career, and that these factors are especially significant for beginning teachers, for the continued development of their pedagogies.

My commitment to English teaching, my passion for literature, and the insights and deep learning I have gained through this process will play a role in challenges ahead,

as I attempt to incorporate graphic literacy as a resource in my future classroom. As Millar Marsh (2002) notes, teachers are continually involved in the “fashioning and refashioning” (p. 8) of their identities; I look forward to continuing the privilege of shaping my teacher identity, and will be conscious of how it will change with each new life experience.

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APPENDIX

Appendix I

The following resources are included as useful examples of graphic novels that can be incorporated into Secondary school curriculum. They are either graphic novels that have been successfully implemented in classrooms as reading units, or graphic texts that offer strong thematic plotlines, poignant images and/or meet curriculum standards for unit study.

Teacher Resources

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- Claremont, C. (2009). *X-men: Inferno*. New York, NY: Marvel.
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- Dixon, C. (1989). *Hobbit or there and back again: A graphic novel*. Columbia, MO: Eclipse Books.
- Doran, C. (2001). *A distant soil*. Orange, CA: Image Comics.
- Eisner, W. (2003). *Fagin the Jew: A graphic novel*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Gaiman, N. (1991) *The sandman: Preludes & nocturnes*. Vol 1. New York, NY: DC Comics.
- Greenberg, N. (2008). *Great Gatsby graphic novel*. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada.
- Hamilton, T. (2009). *Review: Ray Bradbury's fahrenheit 451: The authorized adaptation*. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Hinds, G. (2007). *Beowulf*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.
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- Moore, A., & D. Gibbons. (1986). *Watchmen*. New York, NY: DC Comics Inc.
- Satrapa, M. (2003). *Persepolis*, (B. Ferris & M. Ripa, Trans.). New York, NY: Pantheon Books. (Original work published in 2000).
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- Spiegelman, A. (1986). *Maus: A survivor's tale*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
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