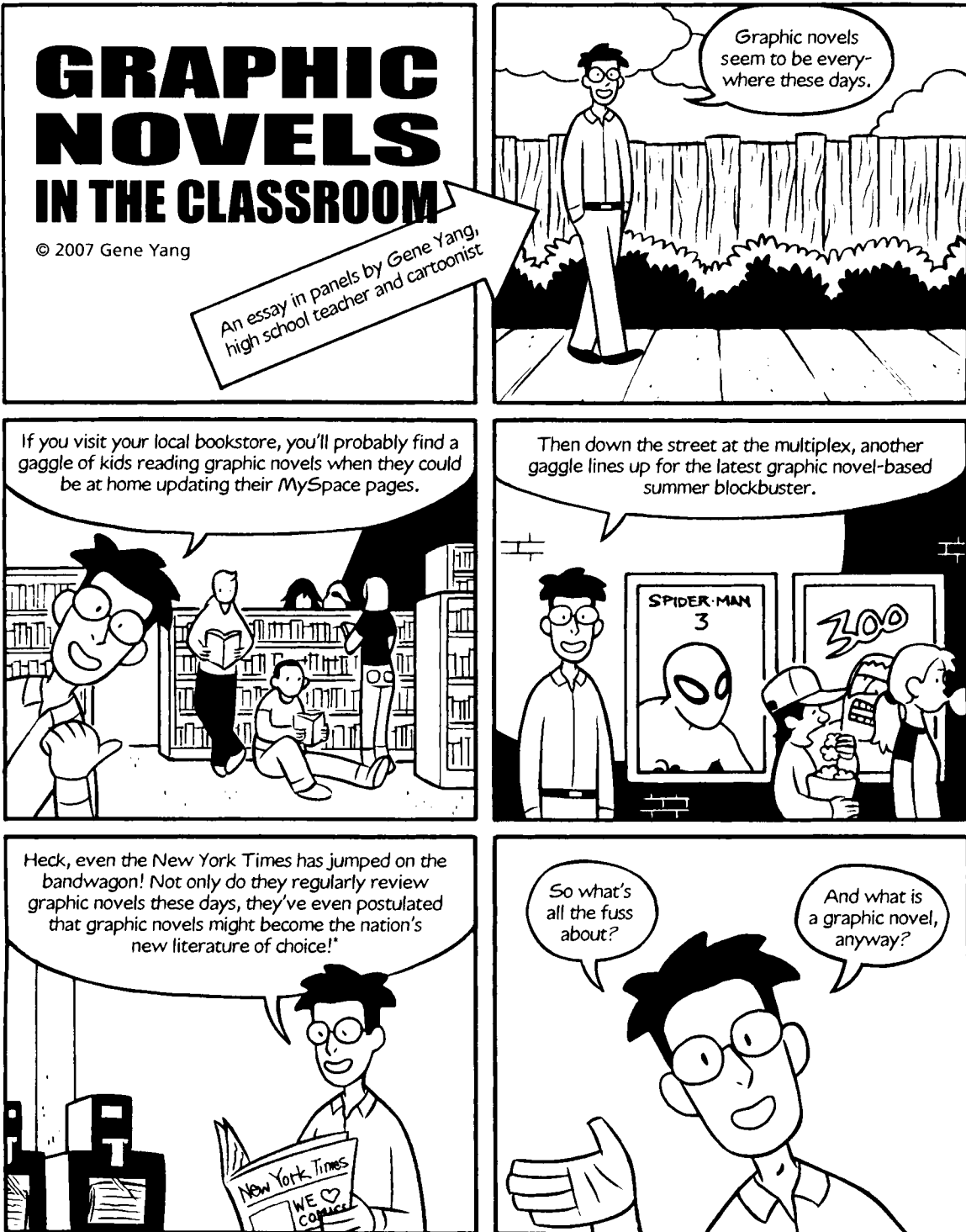


Gene Yang

Graphic Novels in the Classroom

In this article, in what is one of the first-ever journal articles in graphic novel format, educator and graphic novel author Gene Yang makes a case for using graphic novels in classrooms.



*Check out Charles McGrath's article "Not Funny," published July 11, 2004!

The precise definition of the term "graphic novel" is the subject of deep philosophical debates at comic book conventions everywhere.



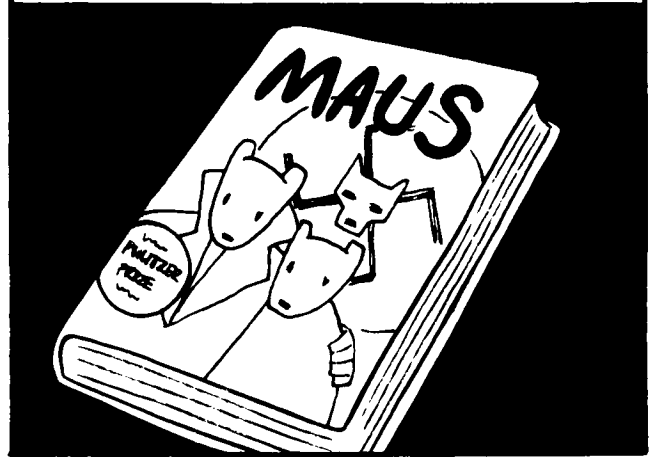
Me, I define "graphic novel" as simply "thick comic book." I call any comic book thick enough to need a spine a graphic novel.



"Graphic novel" is really a political term. It's a part of a growing effort to cast the comics medium in a new, more literary light, apart from the genres usually associated with it.



Over the past couple of decades, this effort has been pretty successful.



In fact, comic books - er, graphic novels - have been making their way into universities, book clubs, libraries...



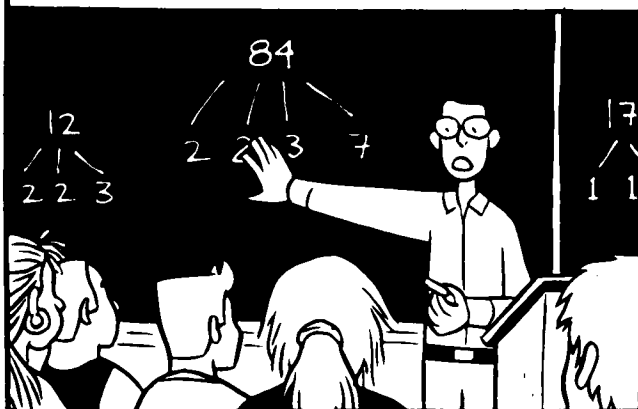
...and even K-12 classrooms.



*That's Wonder Woman and Wolverine on the left, Lynda Barry and Journey Into Mohawk Country's van den Bogaert on the right.

Spiegelman, A. (2003). *The complete Maus*. New York: Penguin.

The comics medium can be a powerful educational tool. I discovered this personally while teaching an Algebra class several years ago.



My duties as the school's educational technologist required that I miss a couple days of class every two or three weeks. To make up for it, I drew "comics lectures" and asked my sub to pass them out to the students.



It was a hit.

I really like those comics, Mr. Yang! Better than when you're here in person, even!

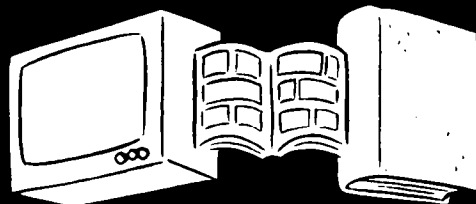
Uh... thanks?

So why were the comics lectures so effective?

When I questioned my students about this, two strengths of the comics medium as an educational tool emerged. First, graphic novels are **visual**, and our students **love** visual media. After all, they're immersed in it.



By combining image and text, graphic novels bridge the gap between



media we watch

and media we read.

Image and text share narrative responsibility. Because of this, many teachers have found great success using graphic novels with ELL students and struggling readers.*

I never thought of that...

That sounds wonderful!

* Stephen Cary's *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom* is a great resource for this!

Second, in comparison to other visual media like film and animation, graphic novels are **permanent**.

Hey! I've been around since the 1880s!

Why I oughta-!

Film

Animation

Now, my use of the word "permanent" needs some explanation. You see, language and actions in film and animation are time-bound. They're on screen one minute, and gone the next.

Oh.

That's what you mean.

Graphic novels, on the other hand, have a "visual permanence" to them. Time progresses only as quickly as your eyes move across the page. Let me show you what I mean.

I'm going to give the same lecture twice, first as fast as I can...

...and then as slow as I can.

In his book *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence..."

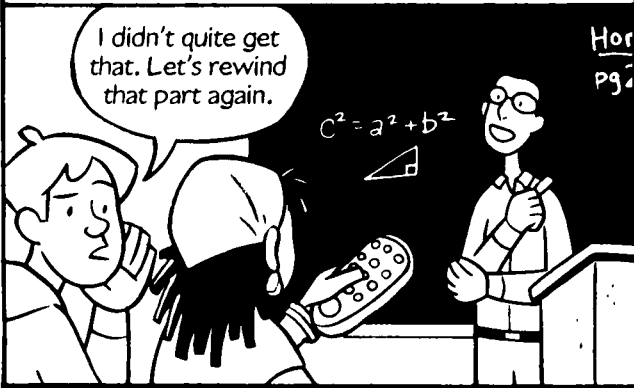
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"...intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer."

"...intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response from the viewer."

See? It doesn't matter how quickly I "say" the lecture. What matters is how fast you choose to read it! The rate of information-transfer is firmly in your control!

When I did my Algebra lectures as comics, it was like giving my students a remote control. They could rewind and fast-forward the lectures whenever they wanted.



Besides being visual and permanent, graphic novels are great for education in so many other ways!



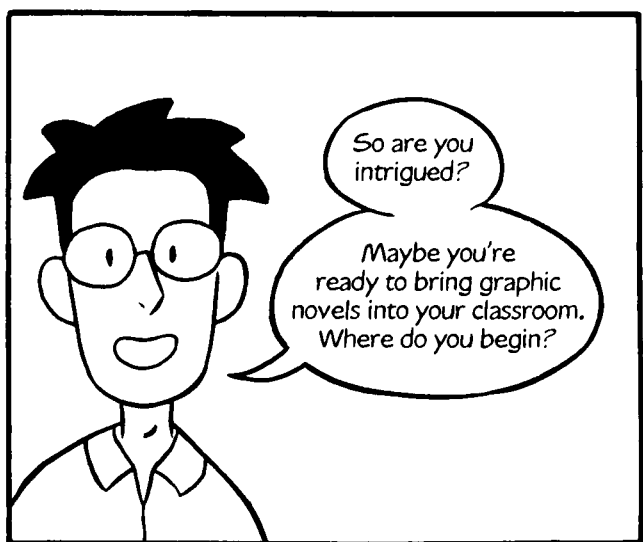
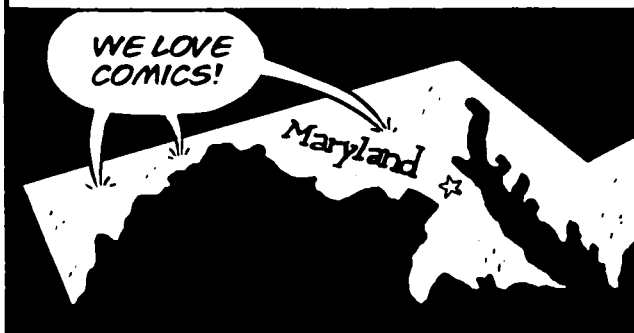
I identified several more when I did my final project for my Masters in Education on this very topic. You can find it online at <http://www.geneyang.com/comicsedu>

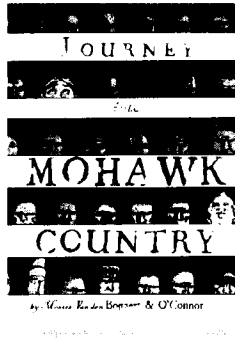


And I'm by no means alone in my interest. Teachers all over the world are creating innovative learning experiences with graphic novels!

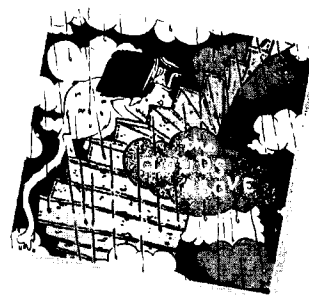
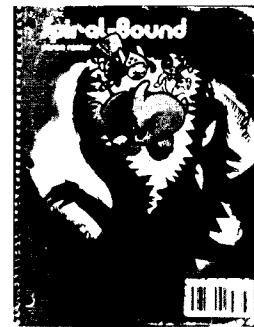


As just one example, the Maryland State Department of Education recently teamed up with Diamond Comics Distributors to form the Maryland Comic Book Initiative. They're making graphic novel-based lesson plans available to K-12 teachers across the state!

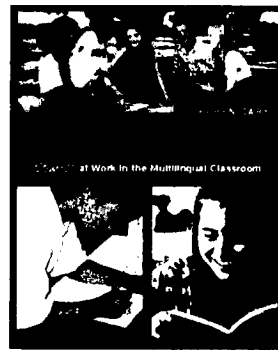
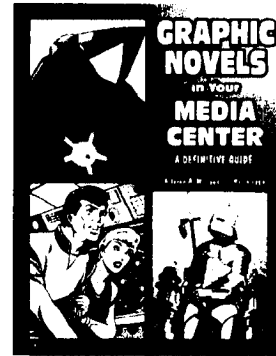
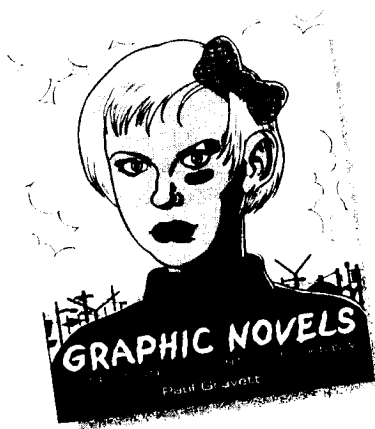




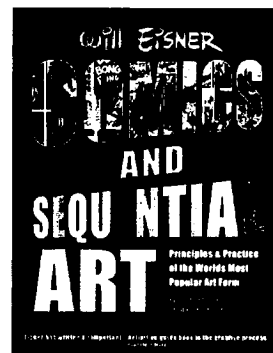
Well, here are some great, classroom-appropriate graphic novels that you ought to check out...



Bibliographic information is provided in the order books are shown: O'Connor, G. (2006). *Journey into Mohawk country*. New York: First Second Books. • Guibert, E. (2006). *Sardine in outer space* (J. Sfar, illus.). New York: First Second Books. • Trondheim, L. (2007). *Tiny tyrant* (F. Parme, illus.). New York: First Second Books. • Faller, R. (2006). *The adventures of Polo*. New York: Roaring Book. • Runton, A. (2004). *Owly: The way home & the bittersweet summer* (vol. 1). Marietta, GA: Top Shelf. • Smith, J. (2005). *Bone: Out from Boneville*. New York: Scholastic/Graphix. • Renier, A. (2005). *Spiral-bound*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf. • Siegel, S. C., & Siegel, M. (2006). *To dance: A ballerina's graphic novel*. New York: Atheneum/Richard Jackson. • Crane, J. (2005). *The clouds above*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.

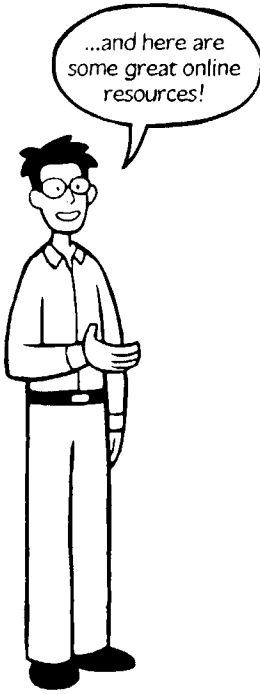


...and here are some books written *by* teachers *for* teachers about teaching with graphic novels...



Bibliographic information is provided in the order books are shown: Gravett, P. (2005). *Graphic novels: Everything you need to know*. New York: Collins Design. • Lyga, A., & Lyga, B. (2004). *Graphic novels in your media center: A definitive guide*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited. • Cary, S. (2004). *Going graphic: Comics at work in the multilingual classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. • McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York: Harper Paperbacks. • Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and sequential art*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse.

Comics in the Classroom.net



National Association of Comics Art Educators
NACAE

www.teachingcomics.org

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First Second
www.firstsecondbooks.com



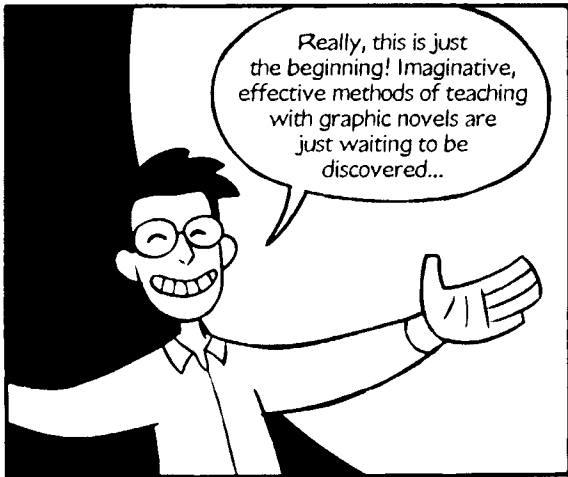
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Gene Yang teaches computer science at a high school in Oakland, California. He has written and published comic books and graphic novels since 1996. His most recent graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*, won the 2007 American Library Association's Printz Award.