Loud and Clear: Using the Graphic Novel to Challenge the Status Quo in Content Area Literacy

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Abstract: Literacy across the content areas has often signified a focus on helping future teachers navigate nonfiction texts and promote command of textual features and literary terms, yet these teachers also need to model critical insight that invites students to question information and purported facts that define their realities. Following a brief review of literature, we situate ourselves and our students. This article documents the pedagogical moves to introduce a graphic novel in a university Content Area Literacy course while also showcasing insightful responses from teacher candidates along the way. We argue that using a graphic novel and introducing it strategically to teacher candidates complicated their ideas about literacy engagement. Further, our work challenged teacher candidates to consider literacy practices, especially involving nonfiction texts, that are multidimensional and critical.

Keywords: graphic novel, comics, content area literacy, literacy practices, teacher education

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Introduction[1]

As most states continue to adopt versions of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for language arts and literacy that prioritize literacy integration across the disciplines, Content Area Literacy (CAL) courses have become a central component in many teacher education programs (Friedland, Kuttesch, McMillen, & del Prado Hill, 2017). University instructors are tasked with providing innovative opportunities for teacher candidates to hone their skills in designing and delivering literacy instruction that considers 21st century, field-based literacy practices in addition to academic knowledge and skills (Marlatt, 2018a). While literacy across the content areas has often signified a focus on helping students navigate nonfiction texts and promote command of textual features and literary terms (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012), future teachers also need to accompany these processes with a component of critical insight that invites preservice teachers to question information and problematize purported facts that define their realities (Todorova, 2015).

In the spirit of challenging the status quo, which we define as a static view of literacy teaching methods and curricular resources, we present a snapshot of a lesson we implemented in a recent CAL course, which centered around the comic *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015). In this lesson we sought to complicate teacher candidates' ideas about the conditions and manner in which students engage in literacy practices. Alternative texts such as comics position teacher candidates to expand their conceptions of literacy instruction involving nonfiction study, literary terms

learning, and more. As such, we define literacy as New Literacy scholars do, aligning it with an ideological model (Street, 1984) which positions literacy as events and practices that are multidimensional and social (Heath, 1983; Street, 2003). Approaching literacy in this way challenged the status quo within a CAL context and invited critical and multimodal pedagogical practices and student engagement.

Our objective in sharing our voices from the field is twofold: 1) to demonstrate the introduction of a comic, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015), describing pedagogical moves and resources for content literacy, and 2) to describe the impact of this experience on developing critical and multidimensional literacy pedagogies for ourselves and for teacher candidates.

Review of Literature

The Challenges of Infusing Literacy Across the Content Areas

As Barry (2012) points out, many new teachers emerge from their preparation programs with a high level of anxiety related to literacy instruction, marked by a strong reluctance to promote literacy within their disciplines. Much research has been conducted on the variety of factors contributing to new teachers' hesitations with literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Philosophically, a large number of educators approach their chosen content areas without a clear understanding of how literacy pertains to subject area knowledge and skills (Alger, 2007; Spencer, Carter, Boon, & Simpson-Garcia, 2008). Logistically, many new teachers simply find

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[1] As researchers and writers, we acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we will use "he" to refer to individuals who identify as male and "she" to refer to individuals who identify as female. We have selected these pronouns because we believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

the integration of literacy strategies in their curriculum too challenging to justify the time and effort required for facilitating instruction (Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Lesley, 2014). Mitton Kukner and Murray Orr (2015) argue that the institutional pressure of producing acceptable scores on standardized tests prevent many teachers from buying in, as they perceive infusing literacy standards as extra and unnecessary work. Soares (2012) agrees, illustrating the constraints expressed by many novice teachers who feel overwhelmed at the prescribed volume of curricula they inherit. While few educators will deny the importance of literacy in general, a large number are either unequipped or unwilling to promote literacy in their specific content areas (Bogard, Sableski, Arnold, & Bowman, 2017).

In response to these conditions and spurred by federal and state policies mandating the infusion of literacy standards across subject matter taught in schools, most colleges of education have made CAL courses a requirement for licensure (Friedland et al., 2017). CAL courses carry both symbolic and pragmatic objectives, serving to dissolve the suggestion that literacy development belongs exclusively in one content area or another while granting candidates from all fields the opportunity to develop content-based literacy strategies and impactful instructional techniques (Defrance & Fahrenbruck, 2016; Gillis, 2014; Hynd-Shanahan, 2013; Lester, 2000).

CAL courses are typically placed toward the end of a teacher candidate's program of study, prior to their student teaching assignment. There courses involve the modeling of literacy integration within a class of education majors across various subject areas (Lesley, 2011). Through a variety of resources such as young adult literature or reading circles, students are exposed to literacy standards that can inform how they design and carry out lesson plans and are taught to read, write, and make meaning like scientists, artists, historians, etc. (Faggella-Luby, Graner, Deshler, & Drew, 2012; Marlatt, 2018a). Scholarship continues to grow around empirical examples of instructional activities in CAL coursework (McMillen, Graves-Demario, & Kieliszek, 2018). For example, Marlatt and Cibils (2018) recently investigated preservice teachers' reflections on their favorite texts via autobiographical poetry. As teacher educators continue to support candidates' development of CAL instruction, a major challenge they encounter is locating teachable texts that are versatile enough to connect with multiple disciplines and nuanced enough to impact learning within interactive academic spaces.

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Multidimensional literacy through the study of comics

As scholars and as literacy educators, we view literacy broadly, as social events (Collins & Blot, 2003) and situated in social, political, and cultural worlds (Larson & Marsh, 2005; Street, 2003). Literacy, here, is also multidimensional including writing, using, or engaging with print text (Heath, 1983) and other graphic signs (Street, 2003). In fact, Collins and Blot suggest the term litera<u>cies</u> to account for "a multiplicity of social practices" (p. 60). This multidimensionality extends to the ways literacy is increasingly multimodal (Kress, 2011). Multimodal texts combine multiple modes, which are "resources

for meaning-making, including image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech, and sound effect" (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 1).

As teacher educators, our shared notion of multidimensional literacy guides our practices with preservice teachers whose own perceptions of literacy can be sophisticated through exposure to myriad contexts surrounding how readers make meaning in and alongside texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). We felt it was valuable, if not necessary, to use the comic medium in our teaching to encourage "a broader and more contemporary view of what 'reading' and 'texts' mean" (Martínez-Roldán & Newcomer, 2011, p. 189).

Yet, "comics as a reading form was always assumed to be a threat to literacy" (Eisner, 1985/2002, p. 3). The comics medium, which refers to a range of texts, including shorter comic books, longer graphic novels, and a variety of genres, including nonfiction, are still too often perceived as simple or easy, and often looked at as "lowbrow" literature (Op de Beeck, 2012, p. 468) or as harmful and causing delinquency in young readers (Krashen, 2004; Sabin, 1996; Versaci, 2008). In fact, the terminology shift from comics to graphic novels was meant to turn away from negative assumptions about the comics medium as a whole (Gordon, 2012). In order to counter the hierarchy of terms for this medium, we will refer to "juxtaposed pictorial and other images formatted in deliberate sequence with the use of panels and other structural devices, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the reader/viewer" as *comics*[2] (Dallacqua 2018, p. 274; McCloud, 1993). The negative assumptions associated with terminology and the texts themselves have generally been dispelled in the

realm of education. Comics are becoming more and more acceptable and legitimate in classrooms (Abate & Tarbox, 2017; Connors, 2016) and higher education (Carter, 2014; Tarbox, 2016). Yet, they still often carry a stigma.

Pre/inservice teachers often see the potential value in using comics in classrooms (Clark, 2013; Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011; Rice, 2012) but some remain hesitant for various reasons. This hesitancy on their part may connect to a lack of knowledge or assumptions about knowledge and opinions held by colleges, administrators, and community members (Clark, 2013). Preservice teachers in Clark's study noted fear that administrators, other teachers, parents, and even their students might view their class as "easier" because of the use of comics and that they may not be able to meet content standards appropriately, resulting in their need to "justify their use of graphic novels" (p. 43). Despite the high level of engagement and positive shift in opinions, the comic medium did not encourage teachers to use these texts. Clark's findings bring to bear further questions on how to continue to shift ideologies about these texts and how to teach with them.

Comics remain an important component of literacy education moving forward because their multidimensionality represents new ways of meaning-making and literacy practices (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Casket, & Henry, 2013). As literacy educators dedicated to "a broader and more contemporary view" of reading and text, we were excited to invite the comics medium into a CAL course (Martínez-Roldán & Newcomer, 2011, p. 189). We chose Don Brown's (2015) *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, a text appropriate for middle and secondary readers. This comic expertly details and

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[2] As this article references other scholarship, we will stay true to the terminology other scholars use when citing their work.

challenges the factual events of Hurricane Katrina through watercolor images, direct quotes from survivors and service men and women, and an extensive bibliography. Comics such as *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* are perhaps an optimal vehicle for emphasizing literacy learning across disciplines. *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* is visually compelling and uses color, line, and shading to create mood and foreshadowing. The comic's accuracy of explicit dates, direct quotes, and documentation of government and civic engagement is apparent. This text would support studies across ELA, social studies, and art classrooms while inviting more study in science (e.g., the representation of weather) or math (e.g., statistics). Inviting analyses of nonfiction textual features such as graphics, figures, and captions, while also encouraging literary engagement with plot, characters, and storylines, nonfiction comics like this one arm instructors with ample possibilities for modeling effective literacy strategies (Dallacqua, 2018). The layers of meaning provide opportunities to consider both literary and nonfiction conventions.

Leveraging Critical Media Literacy Through Comics

As scholarship surrounding the use of comics in literacy learning continues to grow, their integration in CAL courses is a promising area of research. Literacy teacher educators increasingly frame curriculum and instruction through a critical lens (Tompkins, 2009). While the definition of *critical* varies widely among scholars and instructors, broad consensus on the term suggests that literacy

educators have a responsibility to move beyond a skills-based approach, to emphasize diverse literacy practices and social contexts in which students operate, and to invite diverse perspectives and methods of meaning-making into classroom discourse (Street, 1995). In our work with preservice teachers in CAL settings, we echo these sentiments and align our *critical* approaches with Lee (2016), whose description acknowledges the multiple sociocultural contributors to our literacy selves while extending the term to include modeling for future teachers on how to interrogate the world around them through and alongside texts and "to empower the marginalized students to change the status quo" (p. 40).

The potential impact of comics in a CAL course is further illustrated when we consider their invitation for readers to exercise critical literacy. Nonfiction comics like *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) introduce readers to a broader view of the comic form and nonfiction (Kersten & Dallacqua, 2017). "Because of their form, graphic nonfiction texts show and tell multiple versions of facts through text and image" (Kersten-Parrish & Dallacqua, 2018, p. 627), providing readers opportunities to "challenge the common tropes associated with nonfiction" (Kersten & Dallacqua, 2017, p. 18). In particular, when faced with multiple representations of events and facts, readers are charged to be more critical, to locate and pose questions to the text and how it shows and tells. These opportunities are especially valuable within a university class focused on CAL practices, where texts and the media that often supplement them are presented as fact-based. As readers encounter contemporary media-text conglomerations at

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Table 1

CAL Students

Content Area	Gender Self-Identifications	Race Self-Identification	Comic Text Background	Willing to Incorporate Comics into Teaching
Agriculture N=-5	Female	Caucasian	little to no readership	Yes
	Female	Caucasian	little to no readership	No
	Female	Latina	little to no readership	Yes
	Female	Latina	moderate readership	Yes
	Male	Latino	moderate readership	Yes
Art N=1	Female	Caucasian	avid readership	Yes
Business N=2	Male	Caucasian	little to no readership	No
	Male	Pacific Islander	little to no readership	Yes
English Language Arts N=4	Female	Latina	moderate readership	Yes
	Female	Latina	moderate readership	Yes
	Female	Latino	avid readership	Yes
	Male	African American	moderate readership	Yes
History N=4	Female	African American	moderate readership	Yes
	Female	Caucasian	avid readership	No
	Female	Caucasian	little to no readership	Yes
	Female	Latina	avid readership	Yes
Math N=5	Female	Caucasian	moderate readership	No
	Female	Latina	little to no readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	little to no readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	moderate readership	No
	Male	Latino	avid readership	Yes
Music N=3	Female	Caucasian	moderate readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	avid readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	avid readership	No
Physical Education N=3	Female	African American	moderate readership	Yes
	Female	Latina	avid readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	little to no readership	No
Science N=4	Female	Caucasian	avid readership	Yes
	Female	Latina	avid readership	Yes
	Male	Caucasian	moderate readership	No
	Male	Latino	little to no readership	Yes
Social Studies N=3	Female	Caucasian	little to no readership	Yes
	Male	Latino	little to no readership	Yes
	Male	Latino	moderate readership	Yes

increasingly rapid rates both in and out of school, comics are positioned to play a significant role in cultivating readers' critical media literacy (Kline, 2016).

The comic form helps readers, and in our case preservice teacher readers, interrogate the contexts surrounding the messages they receive both directly and indirectly. It is a key element of critical media literacy, which McQueeney (2014) defines as a set of practices that seeks to understand the social ideologies that motivate people to create, distribute, and consume media, including the often nefarious interests of corporate power structures, as well as their cultural consequences. Educators empower students through critical media literacy to think carefully about the messages they encounter while developing savvy through and alongside multimodal texts such as comics (Kist, 2005; Redmond, 2012). In a recent study investigating the relationship

between prospective teachers' media consumption and their performances on critical thinking disposition assessments, Birsel (2016) calls for an increase of critical media literacy in the university coursework of students who are preparing to become educators. Comics are positioned to accentuate teacher candidates' critical interactions with media, which Leach (2017) argues, should help define teaching and learning in secondary classrooms.

In introducing the comic medium to future teachers, we argue that the nonfiction comic, in particular, is a promising tactic for modeling and cultivating critical stances in literacy work with media, texts, and content areas. As a nonfiction comic, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) is an exemplar text that aligns with curriculum while encouraging critical questioning and analysis of text, image, and fact (Chute, 2008; Irwin, 2014; Kersten & Dallacqua, 2017; Kersten-Parrish & Dallacqua, 2018; Kersulov, 2016). In particular, we were interested in the ways *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* juxtaposes text and image to illustrate opposing facts during the aftermath of the hurricane. The author's voice and opinions are strong throughout, but expertly intertwined with direct quotes from hurricane survivors and relief workers. Using *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* provided ways to recognize a nonfiction text as artful, literary, open to interpretation, and fact-based.

Reading nonfiction comics is an approachable and accessible way to connect with readers (Irwin, 2014) while "provid[ing] an avenue for students to connect and nurture a level of empathy" (Pace, 2017, p. 12). In the sections that follow, we present our CAL lesson using the nonfiction comic, including a description of how we strategically introduced *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) and made pedagogical moves that would highlight

the visual and textual choices of the author as a way of introducing the medium, while challenging the hesitancies and assumptions that our preservice teachers arrived with.

Context

At Rick's university in the Southwest United States, CAL is a seminal course for all secondary education majors across several disciplines who are approaching the end of their coursework and preparing to enter the student teaching stage of their preparation in local middle and high schools. One of the principal objectives of this seminar is to sophisticate teacher candidates' notions of literacy. That is, to move beyond conventional perceptions of reading and writing in school and enter a more nuanced perspective of how meaning is made in today's classrooms (Marlatt, 2018a). Focusing on literacy as a complex web of social practices is particularly important for candidates who will be teaching within content areas to which literacy has traditionally held fewer connections (Perry, 2012). The course's interdisciplinary contexts allow for innovative modeling of literacy instruction that incorporates nontraditional texts as a way for candidates across content areas to hone their practices of engaging students, while broadening the students' notions of literacy practices.

Our nonfiction comic lesson sought to challenge the status quo, not only in how future teachers envision connections between their content areas and literacy instruction, but also in expanding the critical and multimodal experiences that are possible in a teacher education course. Comic text exercises allowed candidates to encounter new instructional approaches to literacy from a student's point of view, as well as offering them strategies and techniques designed to enhance their own pedagogies. A total of 34 preservice teachers from multiple content areas took part in the lesson. Their

Table 2

Outline of the CAL Lesson

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Introduction to comics – Exploring Assumptions	5 minutes
Introduction to comics -Terminology	5 minutes
Comics page analysis	20-30 minutes
Comics page analysis in pairs (new page)	10 minutes
Review of other visual media	10 minutes
Whole group discussion on how to consider nonfiction comics critically	10 minutes
Reflective Writing	15 minutes

biographical information including the range of background they expressed with regard to comic texts is presented in Table 1. We also explored data from participants' post-lesson responses regarding how likely there were to utilize comics in their own teaching. We gauged this likelihood both informally during the lesson as well as formally through written self-reflections following the lesson.

Rick's positionality as a white, male teacher educator and literacy researcher centers largely around his experiences as a secondary language arts teacher, during which he was often frustrated by the lack of diversity in many schools' literacy curriculum and instruction. Like countless other educators, he worked with many bright, capable students from all walks of life whose literacy practices, informed largely by unique home and social contexts, were not recognized in the academic setting. Driven by the mission of offering all learners equal access to literacy achievement, he strives to present texts and textual operations with which students can identify and succeed.

Ashley is a white, female instructor at a nearby university who shares Rick's mission for working with a range of literary texts that support all students' needs. Also, as a previous classroom teacher, Ashley shared her experience and expertise in teaching comics as a guest lecturer in Rick's course. As an outsider to this classroom (and university context), Ashley's goal was not only to introduce comics as a medium and specific ways to
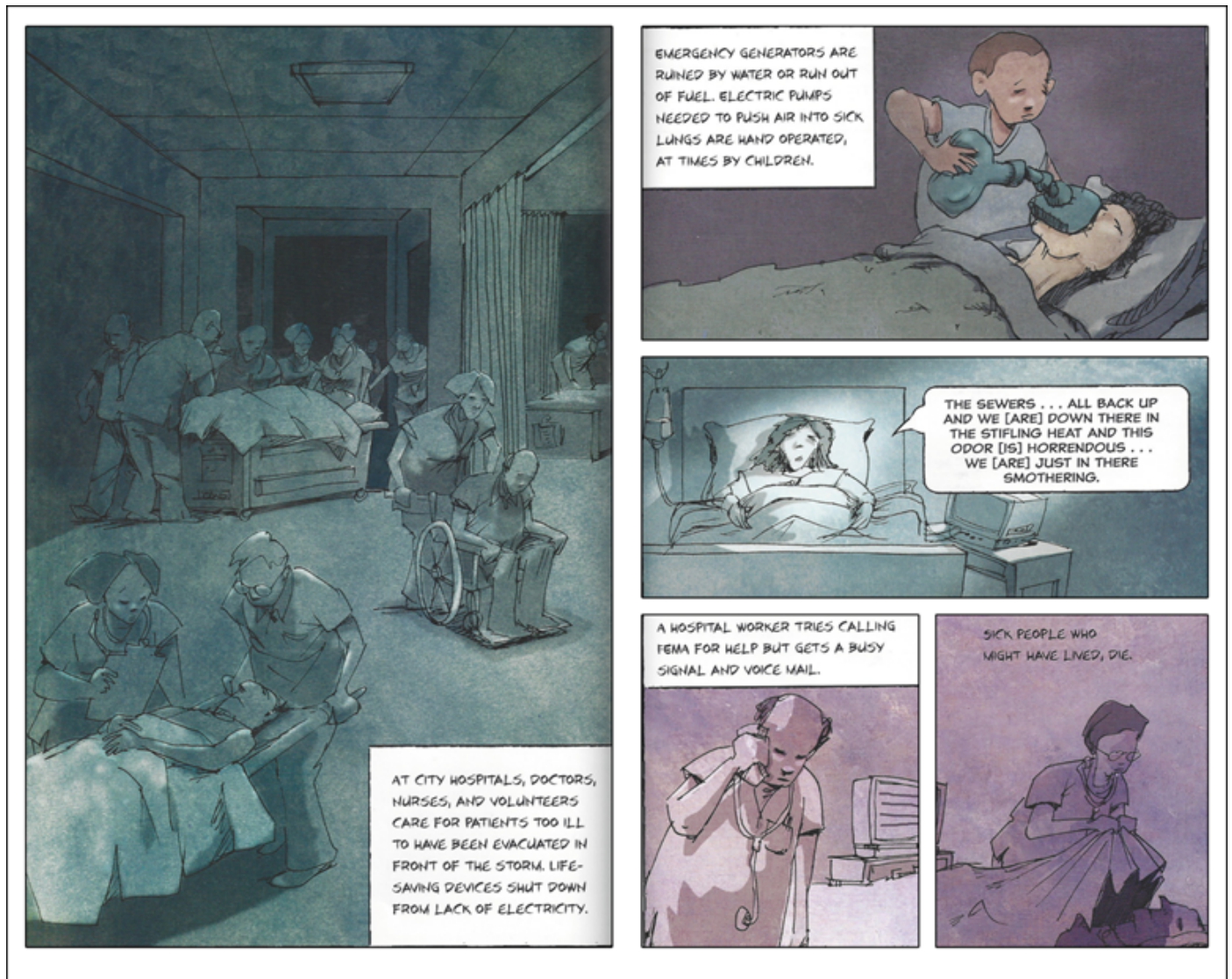
Figure 1. Pages 54-55 from Drowned City (Brown, 2015)

work with them (Connors, 2011), but to challenge students' notions of reading and text.

Implementation

The guest lecture began with Ashley asking the university students to share assumptions about what makes up a comic (for an outline of this lesson, see Table 2). Responses included *pictures and words, superheroes,* and *easy.* Acknowledging the "cultural baggage" of comics (Chute, 2008, p. 453) that impacts teachers' ideologies and classroom uptake (Connors, 2013; Lapp, Wolsey, Fisher, & Frey, 2011;

Rice, 2012) set up the rest of class to challenge these narrow conceptions.

From there, we moved into an introduction of terms (displayed both visually and in text). We looked and considered *panel* placement, shape of *dialogue balloons,* and use of the *gutter* space—getting comfortable with terms associated with this medium. This introduction was brief. We wanted students to spend more time working with a text than learning vocabulary in isolation. With that in mind, we used a two-page spread (Figure 1) on pages fifty-four and fifty-five from *Drowned City:*
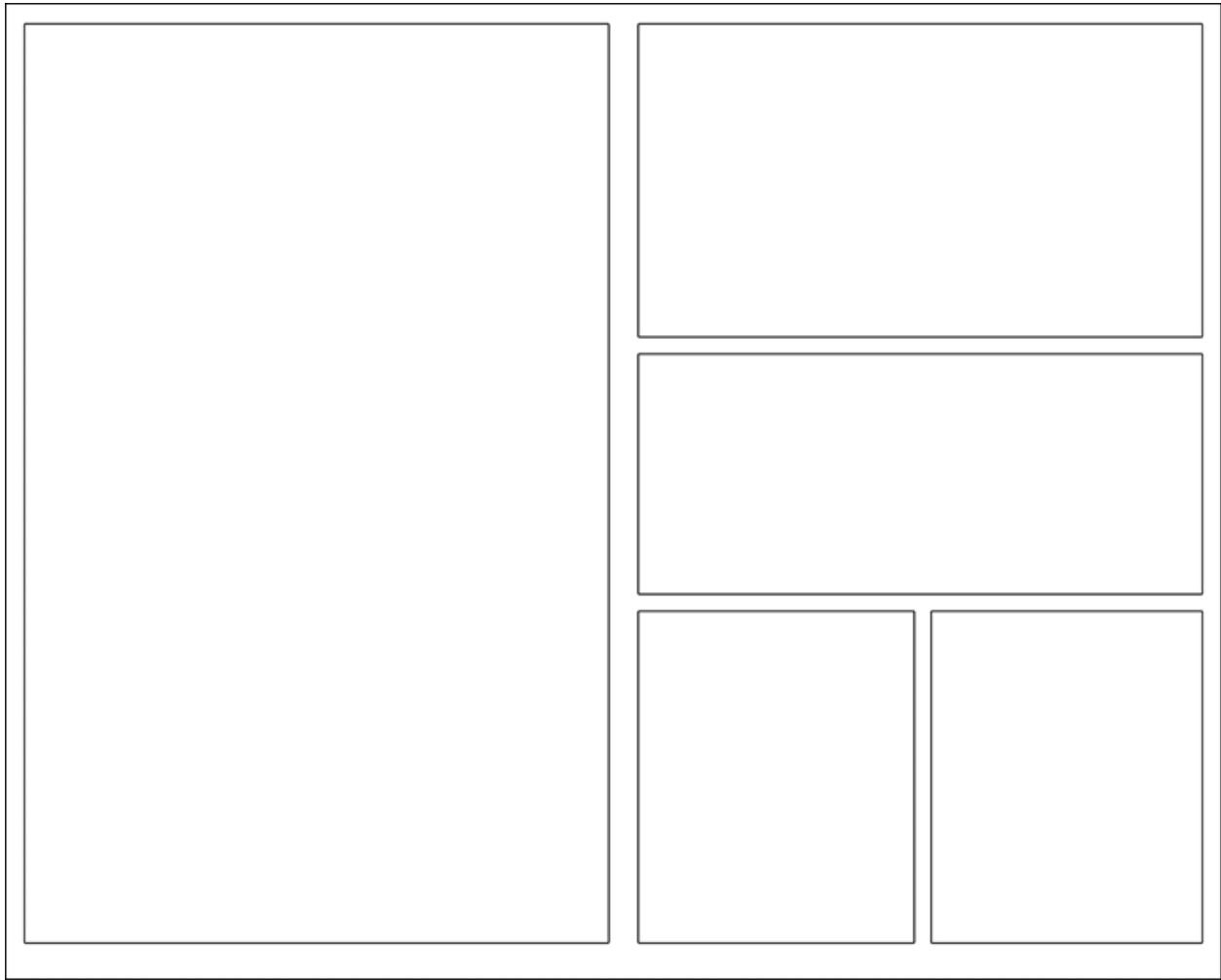
Figure 2. Panel outlines from pages 54-55 from Drowned City (Brown, 2015)

Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans (Brown, 2015). These pages were selected carefully, as they offer expert examples of the terms just introduced, illustrating how these parts of a comic show, tell, and complicate the story in sophisticated ways.

We examined the pages as a whole, and students pointed to what stood out to them as readers and viewers. In particular, students noted the color and lighting that called their attention. The monochromatic watercolor panels created a mood thick with sadness and tragedy. Students noticed the use of multiple colors for the top panel on page fifty-five, holding our attention on the young boy charged with operating an air pump to keep a

woman alive. Inductively, Ashley took this opportunity to point out the study of mood and author voice in English language arts (ELA) settings, which was the work many of the university students were currently engaging in.

Next, the page was altered digitally by Ashley to show only the panels (Figure 2). By isolating this part of the comic, the thin frames outlining the five panels that make up the pages were highlighted. Recognizing that one panel made up the entirety of page fifty-four, Ashley asked students to think about the choices Brown (2015) made to establish the setting before moving into the details of individual's situations within the hospital on the next page.

Again, we were thinking about conventional literacy practices (such as setting, establishing introductions followed by details), but through a visual medium.

We also discussed the gutter space here, briefly bringing the images back into the panels, looking specifically at the bottom two panels. These seem to be both connected and cut through by the gutter. Students drew on writing terms such as cause and effect and impacts of time as they observed the subtle shift of color—the purples darkening in the last panel as a doctor covers a body that has run out of time.

Finally, Ashley directed students' attention to the caption boxes and dialogue bubbles on the page, removing the images and concentrating on the words (Figure 3). However, our focus was not only on the content, but also the visual nature for the words, making the changes in fonts more obvious. Students realized that the center panel on page fifty-five was a dialogue bubble in a different font and with clear edits and changes to verb tense: "The sewers...all back up and we [are] down there in the stifling heat." Brown (2015), as an author of graphic nonfiction, is careful to point out direct quotes in this way. We realized, as a class, that there is separation between his voice as the author and
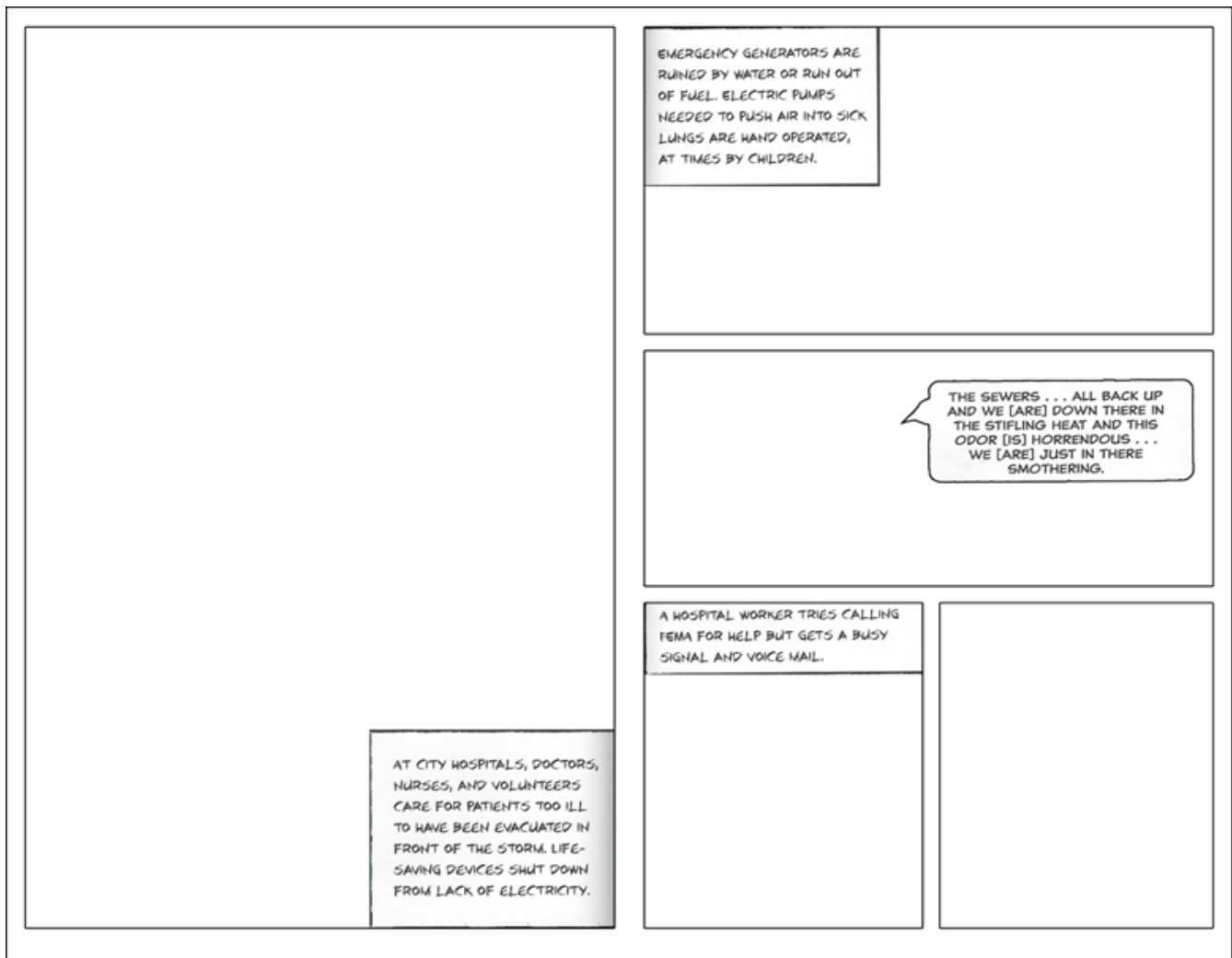
EMERGENCY GENERATORS ARE RUINED BY WATER OR RUN OUT OF FUEL. ELECTRIC PUMPS NEEDED TO PUSH AIR INTO SICK LUNGS ARE HAND OPERATED, AT TIMES BY CHILDREN.

THE SEWERS . . . ALL BACK UP AND WE [ARE] DOWN THERE IN THE STIFLING HEAT AND THIS ODOR [IS] HORRENDOUS . . . WE [ARE] JUST IN THERE SMOTHERING.

A HOSPITAL WORKER TRIES CALLING FEMA FOR HELP BUT GETS A BUSY SIGNAL AND VOICE MAIL.

AT CITY HOSPITALS, DOCTORS, NURSES, AND VOLUNTEERS CARE FOR PATIENTS TOO ILL TO HAVE BEEN EVACUATED IN FRONT OF THE STORM. LIFE-SAVING DEVICES SHUT DOWN FROM LACK OF ELECTRICITY.

Figure 3. Panel outlines, caption boxes, and dialogue bubbles from pages 54-55 from *Drowned City*: *Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015)

narrator, and the voices of those who were part of the hurricane. This becomes more obvious, as Ashley directed attention back to the last panel. There is narration there from Brown which reads, "Sick people who might have lived, die." Although, these words are not contained within the white caption boxes like the rest of the page. We discussed how this was a choice made by the author, adding to the ominous and distraught mood of the page.

In considering the high emotional content of this text, a piece of nonfiction, we launched into a discussion of truth and fact. Students approached these pages and others we looked at together with critical eyes, recognizing the layers of information present and the ways in which the author's voice is very present. For example, Ashley presented questions that supported taking a critical stance

with this text, including: *How is history being represented? Who gets to represent it and who doesn't? Are multiple perspectives represented? Are they balanced?* She referenced page eighty-three of *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015), on which there are images of George W. Bush and Mike Brown, who was the head of FEMA at the time (for more about this, see Kersten & Dallacqua, 2017). They are framed in a panel just as they were when they appeared on television in 2005, Bush saying "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job." However, also on this page is a panel showing dead bodies floating in the water, as part of the disastrous aftermath of the hurricane. The panels on this page are close together, with no gutter space between them, visually illustrating multiple truths about how the aftermath of Katrina was being viewed and shown (in both the book and in the
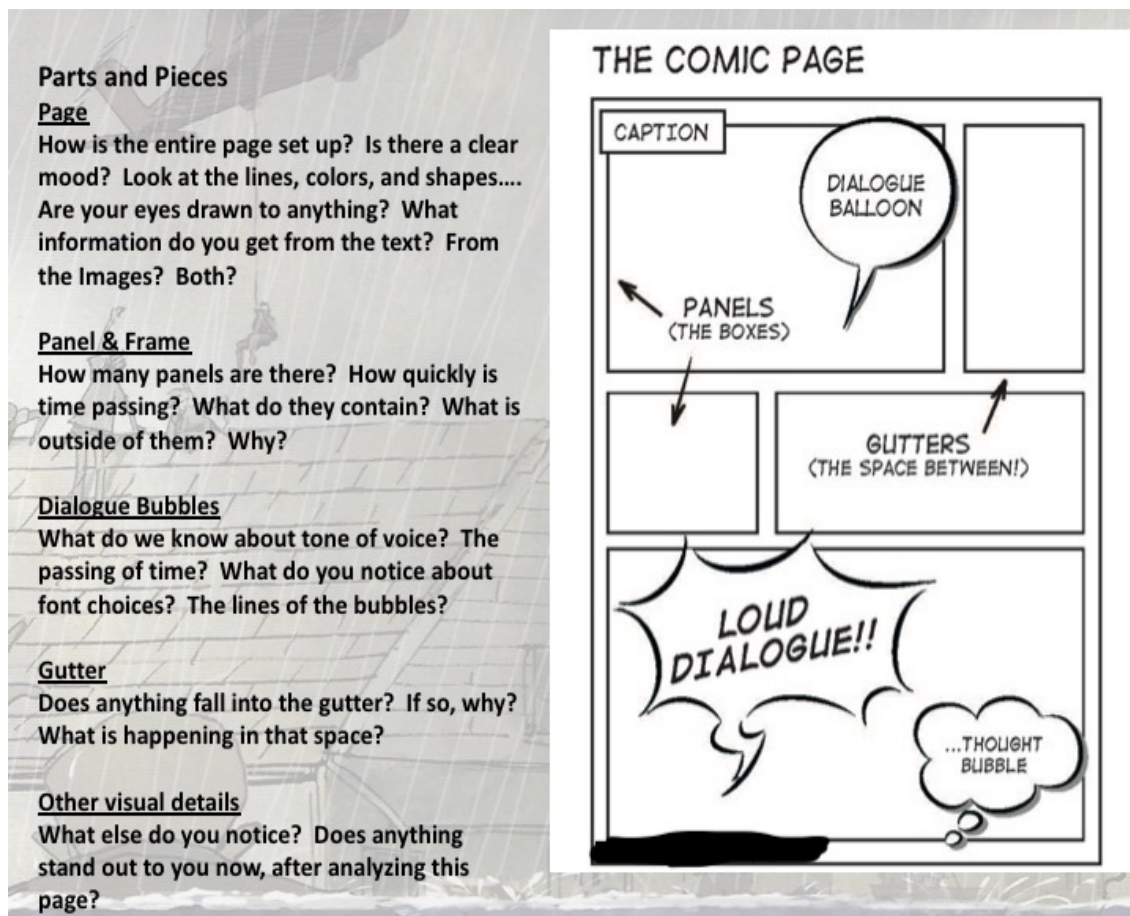

Figure 4. Guiding questions for students to consider during the lecture. (see also Author B, 2017; 2018)

media). This page, in particular, stands as an exemplar for the ways comics' structure can cultivate critical media literacy as well as notions of truth in nonfiction.

Ashley also paired *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) with an image from a science textbook page defining hurricanes and includes a photo from Hurricane Katrina rescue efforts. While textbooks are often positioned as fact-based and not to be questioned, we dissected this page in similar ways to the comic, breaking down the placement of images, font changes, and photo choices. Here too, we recognized the choices made by authors and editors in their portrayal of hurricanes and Katrina.

As teacher educators, an important aspect of our work is centered on preparing preservice teachers to not only design engaging literacy instruction that invites readers to take critical stances, but also to position their practices to address academic standards across content areas. Because our universities are located in a Common Core state, our interactions with students are largely framed by exploring ways in which CCSS can be incorporated into their curricular materials and instructional strategies. In line with these priorities, Ashley's focus on narrative elements and textual features aligned with standards for language arts and literacy throughout the lesson. Additionally, her discussions with students from other disciplines such as science and social studies sparked numerous conversations surrounding potential activities involving topics such as water diversion, calculated disbursement of emergency supplies, and rates of population impacted by natural disasters. Ashley's critically-engaged approach highlighted for students the text's many interdisciplinary possibilities for standards-based literacy instruction.

Responses

Throughout the session, teacher candidates (pseudonyms used) offered insight on a number of topics such as approaching literacy instruction across content areas, negotiating innovative teaching strategies with conventional approaches, and using alternative texts to enact critical literacy. Guiding questions on a graphic organizer (Figure 4, see also Dallacqua, 2017 and Dallacqua, 2018) as well as impromptu discussions presented ample opportunities for students to respond. After admitting to thinking little about literacy during her science methods coursework, Reba outlined comics' applicability to labs and connecting science to students' lives: "Something like this is perfect for making science matter." Esther contrasted the lesson's approach to reading skills such as comprehension and fluency with those of a teacher she recently observed: "In reading we talk about standards; can they understand what they read? Using a text they can actually get into will tell you more than a recycled worksheet. 7th graders will tell you that loud and clear."

By interspersing personas between their current roles as literacy students and their future assignments as educators throughout the session, candidates cultivated a space for rich responses to the text and compelling reactions to the literacy practices featured during the lesson. During the class's discussion on the impact of captions and dialogue bubbles, Ashley prompted students to think about how the author might be challenging readers to reassess the accuracy of media portrayals of Katrina based on experiences of survivors and those who witnessed events associated with tragedy first-hand. Julius, a music major student, argued that our understanding of history is shaped largely by competing perspectives. After stating that any single fact can involve multiple truths based on how individuals perceive the world, Julius said, "The

truth about what happens is complex, it's open to interpretation. Students especially, need to know who is telling them things in a certain way and why. This a good way to help kids think about nonfiction, especially in this post-truth world we are calling ourselves. To teach them to come to their own conclusions."

Julius's statement sparked a robust conversation around the nature of truth, wherein we explored probing questions such as, *How do we arrive at agreeable truths? At which point do some truths become challenged or discounted? Whose truths count for more? Can the pursuit of truth result in achieving new levels of understanding and empathy*? As preservice teachers shared their ideas, we steered them toward the notion that the truths society choose to honor or problematize largely reflect inequity in the voices which are allowed to be heard and those which are silenced. We shared our critical perspective that as educators—when we allow some students to be underserved or marginalized by not representing their cultural backgrounds and literacy practices in our curriculum and instruction, we are ignoring or censoring the truths they contribute to the classroom. *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) powerfully demonstrates that not all truths or the individuals who carry them are treated equally, that a dominant single story on the surface can often drown out the stream of stories below.

The theme of multiple truths was taken up by Joy, an English major student, who discussed canonical works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) that can offer students entry points into critically

> **"*Drowned City* (Brown, 2015) powerfully demonstrates that not all truths or the individuals who carry them are treated equally, that a dominant single story on the surface can often drown out the stream of stories below."**

engaged textual engagement. Describing a lesson she recently co-taught in her practicum classroom involving versions of truth, Joy said, "There are a lot of similarities between that book and *Drowned City*, and they could even be taught together by focusing on points of view and perspectives. Students need to know that not everyone sees the world like them." Walfredo, a business education major student hoping to teach high school accounting, was also inspired to share some insight from his own experiences and said, "We see this all the time with business, especially talking about business ethics. Sometimes it's not the truth of the matter but how well someone is able to present it. If they lack literacy skills, their truth is questioned." Walfredo went on to describe how he could design ethics labs in his accounting classes that could help students understand the importance of questioning for equity and justice. In both examples, we were struck by how preservice teachers were using textual analysis to bolster their conceptions of what critical literacy could look like in their content areas.

Following the open discussion, candidates spent the remainder of class individually responding to a questionnaire (Figure 5) designed to evoke their responses to the lesson. Most importantly, students were asked to describe the impact comics could have on their future teaching. The vast majority of candidates recognized numerous aspects of content area curriculum delivery that could be enhanced by incorporating comics into regular instruction. Brian discussed the opportunity comics structures could offer in visualizing story arcs behind algebraic equations. Robert considered using representative graphics to further his students' understanding of

Comic Questionnaire

Following tonight's lesson, please respond to the following prompts.

1) Describe your reaction to the PPT and discussion of graphic novels/comics.

2) Respond to the notion of thinking about literacy across mediums: how does this process position students for success in literacy, critical thinking, etc.?

3) Describe how situating images and text across space and time complicates or accentuates our conceptions of fact and fiction.

4) Articulate how you see graphic novels/comics contributing to themes of our coursework this semester such as forwarding broad approaches to texts and literacy practices, transmediation of information and meaning-making across images and texts, critical media literacy, etc.

5) Thinking cumulatively about your work this semester with content area knowledge, literacy pedagogy, and instructional design, describe the impact of using graphic novels/comics in your future teaching.

Figure 5. Survey questions for students to consider following the lecture.

how various cultures approach agricultural production and consumption. Piper, who is preparing to teach high school English, elaborated on comics' potential role in illuminating multiple perspectives and motivations of characters during literature study. Carini, a social studies major student, stated, "So many students have trouble relating to historical figures. This is a way for them to really see strangers' personalities more in-depth, and to understand their decisions or policies." As a whole, students, as future teachers, began to acknowledge the breadth of value a comic text can

have on expanding and engaging critical literacy practices across content areas.

Despite the large number of positive responses to comic text integration that teacher candidates offered during discussions throughout the live lesson and in the reactions they shared on the questionnaire, some students demonstrated resistance to the process. The most common feature among students who expressed reluctance to using comics as an instrument in literacy instruction were those who admittedly did not care for graphic texts as a personal preference. While many students who

had originally expressed a dislike of comics or a lack of comic reading experience eventually made moves toward being open to trying them in their teaching, some did not. Rutherford, for instance, who is preparing to teach high school economics, admitted, "I just don't see the point. I can't get into it." Aaron, an agriculture major, agreed: "Nothing against these books, but it's not my thing. And if there's no connection to my class I'm not going to force it." In these cases, we did our best to point out that the act of demonstrating content area literacy can take many forms and that a large number of students can be engaged in subject matter through alternative means such as using a comic text.

Resistance from other candidates was more complex. Axilla described herself as an avid reader of comics, yet she was reluctant to incorporate them into her history curriculum, arguing that, "Just because I'm a fan doesn't mean it will help my students learn history." Nellie, another ELA candidate who expressed a fondness for reading and talking about comics, was apprehensive about bringing them into the classroom due to the perception that they were "easier texts" and "not really part of the canon." Describing her practicum teaching experience that took place the semester prior to our course, Nellie said, "My cooperating teacher last semester was old school. If I would have brought this into her Shakespeare class, she might have kicked me out before the bell rang. No joke." We responded to these candid objections by reiterating that the educational value of any text, comic or otherwise, should be judged by how well it engages students in CAL, rather than according to perceptions or personal preferences. Addressing such a wide range of resistance, even if from a small number of students, was a positive exercise both in reviewing the literacy platforms afforded by comics, as well as in modeling effective classroom management and constructive reactions to student concerns.

Discussion

In our attempt to challenge the status quo of what CAL learning can look like within spaces of teacher education, we designed the lesson to critically address both the student and teacher perspectives carried by preservice teachers. While walking students through the text and asking them questions about their interpretations on the page, Ashley also facilitated ongoing discussions off the page regarding assumptions about truths and misrepresentations in media, affording teacher candidates the platform to simultaneously collaborate around the text while constructing critical insights. This overarching invitational stance promoted authentic engagement with important academic processes such as reading comprehension, successful navigation of textual features, and mastery of literary terms. Our lesson modeled the cultivation of literacy skills and content knowledge, not in isolation, but in tandem with a comic text that served as a vehicle toward critical media literacy.

We discovered that positioning teacher candidates for meaningful literacy instruction in their disciplines involves challenging a number of formidable precedents in education, including the perceived lack of classroom-based relevance of alternative texts such as comics and established approaches to teaching nonfiction. Taking steps to complicating these preconceptions is vital for developing pedagogies equipped to facilitate today's literacy environments that are increasingly defined by multiple sociocultural dimensions and expanding multimodalities (Collins & Blot, 2003; Heath, 1983; Kress, 2011; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Street, 2003).

In addition to helping us make discoveries about the power of comics to enhance CAL, we also witnessed the ways in which comic texts can promote critical media literacy. Because schools and practitioners

who prioritize literacy across the content areas often focus their efforts on reading and understanding nonfiction through fact-based texts and materials, the use of the comic in teacher education also models the act of challenging facts. Cultivating critical literacies marked by a healthy skepticism of messages in media and society is perhaps more important than ever in the digital age. Engaged instructional practices have the power to promote democratic ideals and active citizenship (Baker, 2010; Howell, Kaminski, & Hunt-Barron, 2016; Redmond, 2012). The comic text, both in its form and its resonance, supports students to read the word and the world (Freire, 2001).

As teacher educators, we recognize the impact of comic texts on developing literacy pedagogies as well as their potential for cultivating critical perspectives. We draw these conclusions from the specific contexts of teacher preparation within which our lesson was designed. However, our recent implementation renders a more general reminder that is perhaps just as significant. Comics are versatile texts with possible entry points into many fields of study and carry platforms by which multiple literacy practices can be enacted and examined (Rice, 2012). Their multimodal accessibility illuminates possibilities for any number of academic skills and areas of expertise (Kress, 2011). As seminal or supplemental features of a curriculum, comics have the power to drive creative approaches to interdisciplinary teaching and learning (Dallacqua, 2018).

As literacy researchers and educators interested in the multidimensionality, multimodality, and critical applications of contemporary texts, we are also reflective of the foundation of resistance to

"The combination of concentrated pace and collaborative engagement resulted in a simulation and reflection upon the myriad operations at play when readers were at work."

incorporating comics into school curricula and instruction (Clark, 2013). While ensuring academic rigor and validity in our practices is always a foremost objective, we hope that our focus on standards-based approaches and critically engaged navigation of the text modeled for our preservice teachers a professional approach inspired by the scholarly potential of offering high-interest activities (Leu et al., 2013).

We also acknowledged the preferences of preservice teachers, some of which did not meet the comics medium with enthusiasm, as reflective of the diverse reading interests their future students will bring to the contexts of the secondary classroom. In our decision to utilize *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) as our central text, we made it known to students that we recognize the comic text as just one of many ways to position readers for critical analysis. Yet, we also made it clear that the comics form counted and was valued in this space. This acknowledgement, coupled with our focus on CCSS, allowed preservice teachers the space and autonomy to imagine content area literacy possibilities on own their own terms.

Implications

The *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) lesson presented a number of implications for teacher candidates, in terms of both crafting their own critical literacy identities and cultivating their developing pedagogies. The text's multimodal structure invited students to slow down, reflect, and engage critically with the author, text, images, and messages (Dallacqua, 2018). Complex, deliberate arrangements of images including the use

of color and shading, the importance of line and placement on the page, and tactile sequences of motion and emotion, were supplemented with versatile textual components such as narrative and dialogue, including direct quotations from Katrina survivors. The combination of concentrated pace and collaborative engagement resulted in a simulation and reflection upon the myriad operations at play when readers were at work.

The lesson also led them to acknowledge that history itself is complex, defined holistically through multiple perspectives and simultaneous narratives— a concept well demonstrated by Brown (2015). By considering during nonfiction study not only the author's opinion, but also their own, students further positioned themselves to take critical stances as readers and instructors. This points to the interdisciplinary nature of the text itself. While content areas that have traditionally carried a close connection to literacy standards such as ELA, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* also offered numerous connections to multiple content areas. Its full story arc and illustration of lived experiences made the text inviting and interdisciplinary for the entire class (Marlatt, 2018b).

One example of instruction that our activity specifically challenges is what it means to teach key terms within a content area. While discipline-specific vocabulary is often delivered in a lecture format where students are asked to memorize labels and definitions before moving on to locating and describing with examples, our constructivist approach exhibited the power of applying the terms in practice from the outset. By first having teacher candidates engage in the process as students, then stopping to reflect on the activity from their teacher perspective, we supported future teachers in their growth as facilitators of learning experiences rather than transmitters of information. Such modeling is vital for teacher candidates across fields and subject matter.

Training teachers for 21st Century literacy integration involves far more than preparing them to teach reading and writing and help middle and high school students learn the knowledge and skills of a content area (Lee, 2016). As our access to the multimodal texts and multidimensional literacy practices that define adolescents' meaning-making continues to expand, teacher educators have a responsibility to model how to challenge the status quo by taking up critical stances through and around texts.

Limitations and Recommendations

Although this lesson offers a snapshot of incorporating comics to impact literacy achievement, the activities we describe are not without limitations, both in theory and in practice. While this implementation sparked access to innovative CAL techniques, additional research is needed to answer a number of emerging questions such as investigating other examples of comics that can impact learners across content areas, furthering beneficial instructional practices using alternative texts, and preparing novice teachers to respond to potential pushback from proponents of traditional textual approaches to literacy. Implemented solely in the teacher education setting, we did not gauge participants' inclusion of comics in their own teaching practices in practicum or student-teaching environments. As with other coursework completed as part of teacher preparation, questions remain regarding if and in what ways new teachers are able to translate these ideas into practice. From a praxis standpoint, a more expanded observation of how teacher candidates utilize texts in their own disciplines and in their own classrooms is needed to understand the prospective impact of using

alternative texts and approaches to model literacy instruction.

We call upon practitioners and scholars who are interested in comics to continue investigating alternative texts in academic spaces. As we saw with these students, fear of negative perceptions of teaching comics still existed, even after our work with them. There is still work to do.

Conclusion

As researchers and teacher educators, we are encouraged by the potential for comics in affecting literacy achievement now and into the future. Within a set of textual practices, comics present a platform for challenging conceptions of literacy practices, critical engagement, interdisciplinarity, and more. Although, we have found that just offering up comics as an alternative reading option is not enough. Considering not just *why* students may want to teach with comics, but also *how* they might go about

it in specific and deliberate ways is essential. Time to analyze and critically engage comics was also serving and challenging the overall goals of the CAL course. Our small lesson with *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans* (Brown, 2015) set the stage for larger discussions and questions about education, what we teach, and how we teach. Instead of positioning educators as knowers of facts that must be delivered to their students, this lesson illustrated the precarious nature of facts. Instead of presenting conventional nonfiction texts, we modeled a valuing of layers of literacies and layers of meanings in the hopes of empowering students to do the same in their future classrooms.

The *Drowned City* (Brown, 2015) experience we offered helped us zoom in on the immediate impact of nonfiction comics in a CAL context while also zooming out to what lies ahead in the rapidly changing contexts of literacy education.

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