Get Your Mind IN the Gutter: Inferencing with Graphic Novels

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Abstract

In this article, the authors encourage readers to get their minds IN the gutters—the literal gutters of graphic novels, that is. Gutters, one of many graphic novel text features, provide visual and metacognitive insight readers must use to make meaning as they read. Teachers must provide explicit instruction regarding these features and other characteristics of graphic novels to ensure student success with this popular literature format.

Keywords: *graphic novels, inferencing, text features, explicit instruction*

Introduction

The ability to infer can be difficult for many students (Reading Rockets, 2019; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015), so as teacher educators, we continually search for ways to help students with this important skill. When students infer they are analyzing text and images to break information into parts, draw comparisons between text and background knowledge, and make decisions about meaning. The task of analysis is considered a higher-order thinking skill (Tankersley, 2005). The multimodal nature of graphic novels (GNs) requires readers to use visual cues to analyze images, lines, color, and panel shapes along with text to infer meaning (Boerman-Cornell, 2016) and support the development of students' multiliteracies that include print, photos, videos, or graphs (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2010). Gavigan (2014) suggests that students are constantly building their knowledge and meaning from visual images.

Texas state standards were revised in 2017, and now include language related to the use of inferencing with multimodal text. The current English Language Arts and Reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) require that students listen, speak, read, write, and think about author's purpose and craft using multiple texts. This skill is evident throughout the grade levels of the ELAR TEKS. An example from third grade TEKS follows

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(http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter110/ch110a.html):

The student uses critical inquiry to analyze the authors' choices and how they influence and communicate meaning within a variety of texts. The student analyzes and applies author's craft purposefully in order to develop his or her own products and performances. The student is expected to: (C) explain the author's use of print and graphic features to achieve specific purposes"

In addition to Texas state standards, the International Literacy Association (ILA) standards (2018) promote the use of texts in diverse formats and media (ILA, 2018). In 2019, the ILA began the "Children's Rights to Read" campaign for teachers and literacy specialists which provides 10 essential rights of individuals to reach their full educational potential. Second in the list of ten includes this statement:

CULTIVATE a truly inclusive classroom library…Share a range of text types with students, including multimedia, visual, audio, and graphic novels. These student texts are a great place to start. Incorporate a wide variety of genres…

In this manuscript, authors discuss the importance of using graphic novels to promote inferencing, higher order thinking, and relationships to the TEKS and ILA initiatives. This manuscript focuses on GN popularity, specific terminology, inferencing that focuses on panels and gutters, and modeling of techniques for reading graphic novels in the classroom.

Graphic Novels and Inferencing

According to Oakhill, et al. (2015), there are three types of inferences. Local coherence inferences are moment-to-moment, word-to-word, and phrase-to-phrase connections made during the reading process. Local inferences help make the words within a sentence stick together to make sense. Global inferences occur as readers link ideas across a text to build a mental model of the material at hand. This enables readers to build connections among ideas. Finally, elaborative, or gap-filling inferences occur when readers use background knowledge to make meaning. Oakhill et al. (2015) maintain that many students, especially weak readers, struggle with this ability. Sometimes, students struggle due to a lack of background knowledge. Others struggle because they do not know how to make these inferences. GNs may be a way to support struggling readers as they learn to infer, but it is necessary they understand ways GNs differ from other types of literature.

When working with students on inferencing skills, teachers instruct readers that text evidence plus prior knowledge equals inferencing. This strategy, referred to by Beers (2003) as "It says, I say, and so," helps students understand when information is implied, or not directly stated. According to Marzano (2010), an inference is a foundational skill required for higher order thinking. Traditionally, the ability to infer requires students go "beyond explicit details to make sense of text" (Oakhill, et al., 2015, p. 38). This is depicted in the old adage, "read the lines, read between the lines, and read beyond the lines." How does this work with GNs? The concept is the same. Readers read the panels, read between the panels (the gutters), and beyond the panels (drawing conclusions). This may sound simple, but there are two concerns teachers must address. First of all, students need explicit instruction in the features of graphic novels. These features are described in the next section. Additionally, inferring with graphic novels must be modeled explicitly.

Text Features in Graphic Novels

Various modes of communicating work together in GNs, and readers must use visual features such as color, shading, panel and gutter layout, perspective, and lettering style to understand the author's/illustrator's meaning (Schwarz, 2006). GNs use pictures instead of exposition, or

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descriptive language, to tell their stories, which often requires the reader to infer meaning from the visual (Watts, 2015). "The illustrators use features within the artwork that allow the readers to extrapolate meaning about the plot and characters" (Richardson, 2017, p. 24).

Although GNs may be intuitive reading material in some ways, they require a different type of reading (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014; Pagliaro, 2014) which involves a great deal of visual analysis and inferencing (Miller, 2017). Traditional books include pictures that support the text, but Pagliaro (2014) stated that pictures in a GN "are the text" (p. 33). Terms associated with GNs, found in Table 1, may be of benefit when teaching GNs. Both teachers and students should be familiar with them to improve their understanding of GNs, as well as facilitate conversations in the classroom (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014). In addition to knowledge about GN terminology, teachers should understand the format of GNs, as it can vary, and young readers may become confused by the format when their primary reading experience has been with traditional book formats.

Term	**Meaning**
Panel	An individual frame of content that tells part of the story. A panel may contain images, text, or both.
Plot panel	A panel that sets up the main events (Monnin, 2013).
Character panel	A panel that focuses on the characters in the story (Monnin, 2013).
Setting panel	A panel that shows the time and location of the story (Monnin, 2013).
Conflict panel	A panel that shows the tension within the story (Monnin, 2013).
Rising action panel	A panel that develops the events that increase the conflict of the story and work towards the climax (Monnin, 2013)
Climax panel	A panel that brings the story to the point of greatest intensity (Monnin, 2013).
Resolution panel	A panel that resolves the tension in the story (Monnin, 2013).
Symbols panel	A panel that contains images or words or both that represent something larger th itself (Monnin, 2013).
Theme panel	A panel that focuses on a main idea or message from the story (Monnin, 2013).
Foreshadowing panel	A panel that hints at future happenings in the story (Monnin, 2013).
Combination story panel	A panel that combines two or more of the other panels (Monnin, 2013).
Gutter	The space between panels.

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Dialogue balloon	A graphic tool depicting words spoken by a character (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014)
Thought balloon	A graphic tool depicting thoughts of a character (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014).
Story balloon	A non-dialogue text that narrates part of the story progression or timeline (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014).
Motion lines	Lines that depict movement in pictures (also called zip-ribbons) (McCloud, 1993, p. 110-111).
Icon	An image that represents a person, place, thing, or idea (McCloud, 1993, p. 27).
Frame	The border around a panel. (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014).
Bleed	Art that "runs off of the page instread of being contained by a border" (Brozo, Moorman, & Meyer, 2014, p. 15).
Hue	The shade (hue) of color to communicate meaning to the story.

Table 1 Common terms related to GNs

Text

As we work with GN and inferring, it is important to understand that the text is minimal and must be read in combination with images to make meaning. The text found in GNs takes on several forms. Dialogue balloons, thought balloons, sound effect balloons, and story balloons are the most common. Variations in tone of voice, volume, and emotion are often indicated by varied font syles and text sizes. The color and hue are also used to portray mood, complexity, and emotion (McCloud, 1993). These variations allow the words to "have the power to completely describe the invisible realm of senses and emotions" (McCloud, 1993, p. 135). Three of the most common story balloons are setting balloons, plot balloons, and character balloons (Monnin, 2013). Setting balloons show details about the time and place. Plot balloons share information about the events of the story, and character balloons disclose details about characters' traits (Monnin, 2013). The examination of these text features supports student comprehension of GNs.

Panels

GN illustrators usually place art in panels, which are individual frames of content that tell part of the narrative. A panel may contain images, text, or a combination of both. Monnin (2013) defined a panel as a "visual boundary that contains an element of story" (p. 30) and categorized them into eleven types: plot panels, character panels, setting panels, conflict panels, climax panels, rising action panels, resolution panels, foreshadowing panels, theme panels, symbols panels, and combination story panels. Panel types reflect traditional story elements typically taught in language arts classrooms. The GN panels complement teaching of traditional elements of a story (Monnin, 2013). The labels Monnin (2013) used for the panels are self-explanatory as to what they portray. For

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example, the plot panel "establishes the guiding force behind the story being told" (p. 32), and the character panel enables the reader to learn about the character(s)' traits, habits, and evolution in the story. The combination panel combines two or more of the elements. The reader must determine how to read panels sequentially. Panels and text are usually read left to right, top to bottom. However, some illustrators arrange panels in creative ways that can confuse readers (McCloud, 1993); therefore, inferencing skills must often be applied in order to gain meaning from GN texts.

Gutters

Just as the gutters on a roof carry rainwater, the gutter in a GN carries meaning. A gutter is the blank space between panels. To understand the story, readers "infer what has happened during the transition from one panel to the next" (Watts, 2015, p. 39). This process is called closure (McCloud, 1993; Watts, 2015). McCloud (1993) reported that "panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (p. 67). Monnin (2013) describes the gutter as a "reader-friendly space where human imagination takes over and transforms two or more ideas into one" (p. 45).

McCloud (1993) describes six types of gutters: moment-to-moment, scene-to-scene, subject-to-subject, action-to-action, aspect-to-aspect, and non-sequitur. The amount of closure needed depends on the gutter type. The moment-to-moment gutter in which readers witness panels portraying sequential moments require little closure. The other five types necessitate more inferencing to make sense of the story. McLoud reported that the majority of panel transitions involve action-to-action, subject-to-subject, and scene-to-scene. Students must link the panels constantly as they read a GN, connecting what they see with what they know and imagine. In order to implement GN instruction, teachers must be prepared to teach text features to students so that readers can meaningfully use graphic novel texts (Jiménez, et al., 2017).

Gutter Reading: El Deafo (Bell, 2014).

How does gutter reading work? Figure 1 includes the word POP! in the gutter, between two panels. POP! is onomatopoeia that may be used to depict numerous scenarios. It could represent the sound of a balloon bursting, the sound of a firecracker exploding, or the sound of knuckles cracking. In Cece Bell's Newbery Honor Award winning book El Deafo (2014), POP! does not depict an actual sound. Instead, it depicts the deflating of the main character's self-esteem. In order to understand what happened between the panels, the reader must apply the words or images in the gutter to the events occurring in the panels to make sense of the story. In other words, one must "read between the lines," which requires the application of skills described in this article.

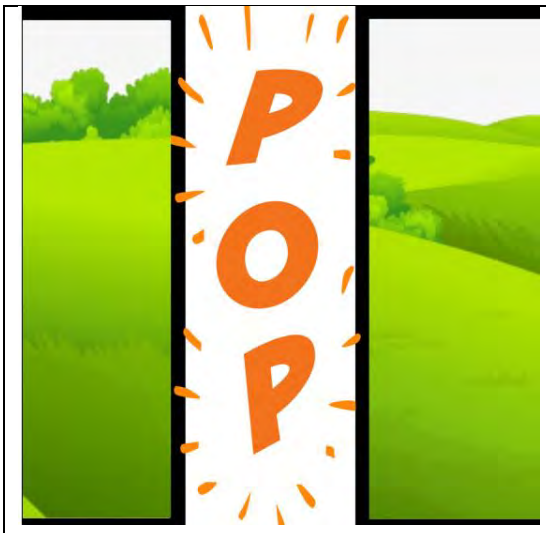

Figure 1: Onomatopoeia between two panels (in the gutter)

To demonstrate the importance of gutter reading to make meaning, we elaborate using page 45 of El Deafo. This GN is a memoir in which the author chronicles her experiences with losing her hearing at age four. In the novel, the main

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character, Cece, is portrayed as a rabbit who previously attended a school for the deaf. Cece's new "Phonic Ear," enables her to hear--she can hear her teacher and others, even if they are in the hallway or in the bathroom! Readers may be able to infer from the panels on page 45 that Cece feels like a superhero as she starts her day at school. Nowhere the page does the reader see the word superhero, but there is evidence in the images, which must be "read," that illustrate Cece's feelings. The illustrator uses only three sequential panels on page 45. In the first panel, Cece is wearing a cape, standing proudly, and thinking (depicted with a thought bubble), "I will amaze everyone." In panel two, Cece is still wearing the red superhero cape. Her hearing aid catches the attention of one of her new classmates, who approaches, and asks, "Hey! What are those things in your ears? Are you deaf?" Then POP! appears in the gutter between panel two and panel three, similar to the POP! in Figure 1. In the third and last panel, Cece no longer wears a cape, she looks upset, and the only text available to the reader is a dialogue bubble with the text, "Ummm." The reader then must infer, from just 16 words, that the phonic ear, or hearing aid, presents both benefits and challenges as Cece starts a new school. These challenges are not explicitly stated in the text, either, but must be inferred.

Several visual cues, especially those in the gutters, must be used in order for readers to understand what happened to Cece. First of all, readers must have attended to the visual features that help characterize Cece. Cece's superhero cape is key here. Her cape disappears in panel three. One must "read between the panels," literally, to understand that after receiving a question about her hearing aid, Cece's confidence bursts… with a "POP!" The use of onomatopoeia is common in GNs, and here it is used "in the gutters" to show an instant decrease in her self-confidence. Cece no longer feels like a superhero, and by examining her facial expressions, like her frown, the reader can infer that Cece now feels sad or uncertain. Perhaps the hearing aid that enabled her to feel more normal will also cause her to feel more isolated.

Modeling

Even though GNs are difficult for some children, experts agree that using GNs with students reaps positive outcomes (Gavigan, 2014; Maughan, 2016). GNs are both engaging and motivational (Swhwarz, 2006; Yang, 2008), but teachers and students alike must understand how to read GNs, as text features in GNs vary from that of the traditional novel. Through modeling activities, teachers may demonstrate how to "read" GNs. Just as teachers carefully choose mentor texts for explicit teaching of print-based reading and writing (Dorfman & Cappellini, 2017), mentor texts for the reading of GNs are important. When teaching with GNs, teachers may consider explicit instruction related to the unique text features. Students need to understand how to make elaborative, or gap-filling, inferences using GNs.

In modeling with GNs, teachers may consider the use of visual thinking strategies (Yenawine, 2013). This discussion strategy focuses on a visual as a conversation starter. When using a page from a graphic novel, students could be asked the following three questions in reference to the image: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find? Instruction includes prompting so that students make observations, provide explanations, and interpret the image. In modeling with El Deafo (Figure 2), the teacher may project the scene just described for analysis. Through modeling and think alouds, teachers may demonstrate ways to infer using visual cues in the panels, between the panels (the gutters), and beyond the panels.

Conclusion

GNs have proven to be motivational to students and solid literature choices for learning (Swhwarz, 2006; Yang, 2008; Gavigan, 2014; Maughan, 2016). Teachers should include a

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variety of literature forms and genres in their instruction. GNs provide a "different and useful format" (p. 77) as well as an option for differentiation (Boerman-Cornell, 2016). We posit teachers should take advantage of this popular format that offers rich educational benefits. Becoming more acquainted with GNs and preparing students to effectively read them is necessary for educators as they bring the graphic world into their classrooms. First, teachers need to read GNs to experience this format themselves (Jimenez, Robers, Brugar, Meyer, & Waito, 2017). Teachers do not need to become experts on GNs (Boerman-Cornell, 2016). However, they should become familiar with popular student choices and develop a general knowledge of the features used in a GN to tell the story. The approach to teaching GNs is similar to using traditional books (Watts, 2015). However, teachers need to recognize the differences related to the text and image presentation, and how those differences affect comprehension (Watts, 2015). GNs require students to read the panels, read between the panels (the gutters), and read beyond the panels. Explicit instruction using the features of GN is required, so that readers become experts at getting their minds IN the gutters.

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