When the Curriculum Needs Rescuing: Superhero Graphic Novels as Disruptive Curricular Forces

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Increasingly, graphic novels are a main staple in today's classroom. Commonly taught titles like *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1996), *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000), and *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) are vital texts that open up important teaching opportunities. We would like to expand the pool of graphic novels to include in middle school classrooms by focusing on superhero graphic novels. Such titles offer connections to students' interests as film adaptations of graphic novels like *Spider-Man: Into the Spiderverse*, *Black Panther*, and *The Avengers* maintain popular culture ubiquity. Superheroes can do more than save the world. Superhero graphic novels can rescue our curriculum from oppressive forces.

In this article we draw on our own experiences theorizing about and teaching superhero graphic novels in middle school English classrooms to outline how the genre can center experiences, ideas, and concepts that are often marginalized in traditional English language arts curriculum. This pedagogical aim is achieved by positioning graphic novels in critical conversations with nonfiction articles, poetry, and young adult literature, which encourages students to engage in cross-textual analysis to deepen their understanding of socio-political issues. Finally, because we recognize potential pushback to teaching superhero graphic novels, we situate our work with standards-based rationales to satisfy curricular mandates outlined by the state.

We are five individual English teachers. Our group includes diverse racial, gender, and sexual identities. We have all taught in the southeastern part of the United States in a variety of settings that span multiple demographic populations. The classroom suggestions we detail are an amalgamation of Jon's middle school English curriculum and teaching along with ideas from the other authors. Throughout the article we use the collective "we" to emphasize that ideas discussed emerged from the multiple conversations we have had with each other on campus, at conferences, and through online communication in theorizing how to position superhero graphic novels as vehicles for pushing against inequities in traditional middle school English curriculum. We note specifically when we are discussing Jon's classroom practice. Our ideas also reflect revisions we've made in our thinking along the way to consider how to improve our previous lessons. The manifestation of those conversations is detailed in the remainder of the article.

Reading Superhero Graphic Novels to Disrupt Curricular Oppression

Our commitment to centering superhero graphic novels in the classroom is part of our larger project of teaching English in critical ways by drawing on the "everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies" (Morrell, 2005, p. 313). Students are already consuming and discussing superhero texts through popular culture. We see and hear our students engaging in conversations about popular Marvel and D.C. movie adaptations daily, whether in between classes or in making connections with course readings. We want to link their interests to classroom learning opportunities. Furthermore, teaching superhero graphic novels in critical ways can push against the "canonizing forces" that marginalize students' interests and voices in constructing middle school curriculum while potentially upholding oppressive ideologies (Thein & Beach, 2013).

Additionally, superhero graphic novels allow us to challenge textual hierarchies and oppressive beliefs about literacies and literature in English classrooms. Julia Torres, co-founder of the movement #DisruptTexts, reminds us that graphic novels can disrupt texts by challenging the "worship of the written word," a feature of white supremacy that perpetuates textual hierarchies

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in English language arts spaces. Similarly, studying characters like Miles Morales is one way to challenge racial hierarchies that dominate English curriculum (Worlds & Miller, 2019) while reading *Ms. Marvel* has been conceptualized as a text that can support students in examining notions of "normal" and the power dynamics that pulse through such notions (Gill, 2016). Our work is guided by these ideas.

While there are several contemporary superhero graphic novels worthy of consideration, we focus on two for this article: *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal* by G. Willow Wilson (2014) and *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man, Vol. 1* by Brian Michael Bendis (2012). We selected these titles for a variety of reasons. One, Miles Morales was a popular character among the middle school students in our classrooms, so it felt natural to incorporate his narrative. Additionally, the storylines presented themes like coming of age and family that had been examined earlier in the school year. Finally, Marvel's decision to racebend (Owens, 2017) the characters from white heroes to an Afro-Latino Spiderman and Pakistani American Ms. Marvel provided a chance to discuss the history of superheroes and the role race has played in shaping *who* gets to save the day in our society and *why* (Torres, 2019).

Teaching Superhero Graphic Novels to Facilitate Critical Conversations

Understanding the curricular potential graphic novels have, we wanted to structure curricular units that supported students engaging in "critical conversations." Schieble (2012) defines critical conversations as teaching practices that help students unearth "tensions in perspective" with the goal of critiquing the ways"power has an impact on people's social, material, and psychological lives" (p. 214). Addressing tensions in students' thinking about representation of heroes seemed like an appropriate aim of the unit given the way superhero narratives, through popular culture, operate in students' lives. We saw surfacing ideologies and power dynamics within superhero narratives and representation as part of a larger goal of having students consider socio-political and cultural dynamics. In other words, we sought to have students address these issues through superhero narratives and then consider how those issues operate beyond the pages of graphic novels and in the workings of everyday life.

Again, this curriculum was implemented in Jon's middle school English classroom. Subsequently, we have all worked to incorporate some of the ideas from Jon's classroom and curriculum in our own individual contexts since this work was originally implemented by Jon.

We organized superhero graphic novels as part of a curricular unit focused on an overarching theme that requires students to grapple with contemporary inequities and injustices. The theme was the foundation upon which the conversations between the superhero graphic novels and nonfiction articles, poems, and young adult literature rested. We curated texts that aligned with the thematic analysis we wanted our students to develop. Students began by selecting either the Spider-Man or Ms. Marvel title, then crafted an adventure through the curriculum by selecting from other curated text lists. An overview of how that curation and curricular organization materialized is located in table one.

With the adaptation of the Common Core State Standards came a new push for nonfiction articles to be given more space in English curriculum. Many English teachers responded to this turn by focusing on how to bundle nonfiction texts with classic literary ones to fulfill the standards (Heitin, 2013). Rather than focus on canonical literature, we situated superhero graphic novels as partners with nonfiction articles, poetry, and young adult literature to facilitate conversations about socio-political issues relevant to students' lives.

We recognized potential pushback or ambivalence about teaching superhero graphic novels. Reverence to textual hierarchies that privilege traditional print masqueraded as comments like, "Aren't they just images?" and, "Is that *really* reading?" Constructing curricular rationales for our decisions was imperative. By situating graphic novels in conversations with nonfiction articles, poetry, and literature, we prepared students for the type of cross-textual analysis that is required by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other state-specific facsimiles.

Nonfiction Articles

As a class, students in Jon's class watched Sana Amanat's 2014 TED Talk, "The Importance of Diversity in the Comic Book Universe" to engage in a dialogue about the significance of racebending in the two graphic novels. This TED Talk acted as a primer for students to consider how power dynamics in publishing industries shape *who* gets to be a superhero. Students took notes during the talk and unpacked their thinking before moving into the nonfiction articles above. After reading either *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man, Vol. 1* (Bendis, 2012) or *Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal* (Wilson, 2014) and unpacking their thinking around Amanat's TED Talk, students then selected two articles to read and synthesize with the TED talk and superhero graphic novel.

Pairing superhero graphic novels with nonfiction articles facilitated conversations about power dynamics within society and how popular culture socializes us to see dominant identities as "saviors" while ignoring the contributions of marginalized communities. The nonfiction articles curated were intentionally selected to address some of the broader themes Jon wanted students to grapple with. For instance, Richard Newby's article focused on the significance of watching Miles Morales, rather than Peter Parker, embody the mantle of Spiderman. The article outlined the historical and cultural significance of such a superhero and contextualized the decision in broader media trends. As a student from Jon's class wrote in one of their responses to Richard Newby's article, "it gave valid reasons on why we should have diverse movies and superheroes. I feel this text was an awakening to many students, because it showed something that our society was lacking, that needs to be worked on." This student saw the nonfiction article as laying a conceptual groundwork for further analysis of considering *who* gets to be a superhero and *why* that analysis goes beyond representation to consider societal power dynamics as well as providing the student with insight into the importance of the curriculum in which they were engaged.

The pairing of nonfiction articles with the graphic novels satisfied the demands of the state standards. Students had to understand the key idea of the articles and note how examples established the key idea throughout the article. Additionally, students had to understand how the TED Talk, a nonfiction text in a digital format, established a key idea. These requirements are central to the standards that dictate the teaching of what the Common Core calls "informational texts."

We suggest that teachers select and curate nonfiction text pairs that address the theme or topics of a curricular unit. One goal of our work was to have students consider how representation relates to power in and beyond graphic novels. Therefore, nonfiction articles that explicitly address this topic were vital for bridging those ideas across graphic novels and nonfiction articles. The thematic or topical focus of a lesson or unit should drive the types of nonfiction articles teachers work to put in conversation with the graphic novels. For instance, a unit that focuses on coming of age narratives uses graphic novels could incorporate nonfiction articles that outline the history of youth and how ideas of youth have changed over time.

Poetry

We turned to poetry-- not to be analyzed in isolation, but to deepen the understanding of a novel and provide multiple perspectives on similar topics and themes (Lubarsky, 2002). The poems we selected provided nuance to the major socio-political issues the two superhero graphic novels address. For instance, several students noted that the Shel Silverstein poem "Underface" spoke to the importance of resisting forces that would try to deny people of their identities. This idea animated Ms. Marvel's narrative, as the young Kamala Khan must combat external and internalized racism and Islamophobia in order to awaken her powers as the titular superhero. "Jabari Unmasked" provided the space for students to consider how external oppressive forces shape the internal dynamics and decisions of Kamala Khan.

Poems with "masks" in their titles were obvious choices as superheroes literally wear masks. The focus on masks allowed us to support students in inquiring around what a mask means beyond the literal. What is the function of masks in society? Why do people wear masks? How are masks more than just a piece of fabric? These probing questions allowed students to go beyond the literal meaning of words and into their figurative and contextual meanings, which strengthened their understanding of the poems and the graphic novels. For instance, one student in Jon's class noted that the poem "We Wear the Mask," paired with their superhero graphic novel, made them consider "why people hide their identities and choose to present as something they're not" and "look at how we define a superhero and who could be considered a superhero in real life." This analysis was the result of comparing the prose of a poem with the images and dialogue of the graphic novel.

Poetry working in tandem with the graphic novels supported students in considering the metaphorical dimensions of a "mask" and addressed how masks operate on many levels in society. This type of thinking also supported students in strengthening their literary analysis capacities. Pairing poems with graphic novels supported students in literacy practices that went "beyond the poem itself" by having students consider "social, cultural, and historical questions" that the poems surface (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2015, p. 120). Students drew connections across texts to address broader questions beyond basic comprehension concerns. Rather than see the poem as something to be "solved," students place the poem's ideas in partnership with ideas from the graphic novels to deepen their understanding of ideas like belonging, inclusion, and assimilation. Teaching poetry became a way to engage in the critical conversations we wanted students to access throughout the unit.

Similarly to our recommendations of nonfiction articles, we suggest poems are selected that align

thematically or topically with the graphic novels being used. Jon wanted to emphasize the concept of mask as a socio-political and cultural one, so poems with "masks" in the title were apparent. A different focus would yield different poems. For example, a teacher who wanted students to grapple with heroic attributes or a question such as "what makes someone a hero" could pair graphic novels with traditionally taught epic poems like *The Odyssey* or *Beowulf*. Teachers can construct a bank of poems that fulfill the thematic or topical concern and then ask students to select one or two to read and analyze alongside the graphic novel.

Young Adult and Middle Grade Literature

Young adult and middle grade literature can also be placed in critical conversations with graphic novels. We situated the graphic novels in conversations with young adult and middle grade literature titles, including Jason Reynolds' (2017) *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* and Nic Stone's (2020) *Shuri: A Black Panther Novel*. However, these textual conversations among fiction don't have to be confined to superhero narratives. Students created thematic connections amongst the graphic novels and other young adult and middle grade literature that surfaced socio-political issues.

Organizing curricular units through pairings of graphic novels and middle grade and young adult literature can revolve around typical themes such as friendship, family, change, and coming-of-age. Teachers can embed questions that engage students in critical conversations within those broader themes throughout the unit. To elaborate, a question like "what factors shape *how* characters experience youth" can identify societal pressures that Miles Morales has to face in *Spider-Man* while also addressing structural schooling inequities posed in the book *George*. Such a cross-textual analysis supports students in thematic thinking grounded in critical conversations about power and age.

One recommendation is that teachers select their students' favorite titles to draw connections between. We included titles that were valuable for our students. For the conclusion of a curricular unit, we suggest thematic or topical book clubs for the young adult and middle grade books (Cherry-Paul & Johansen, 2019). Students can return to the broader questions during their book clubs in order to continue connecting broader themes across texts. An overarching essential question or daily guiding questions can support students in making these thematic connections across graphic novel and middle grade and young adult literature. For instance, Jon had students conduct brief writing responses throughout the unit using questions that supported students in making explicit connections across texts. These daily writings accumulated across a unit and served as a starting point for multiple summative assessments.

Finally, teachers can construct curricular opportunities for students to make connections across graphic novels, nonfiction articles, poems, and middle grade and young adult literature. These connections can serve as the basis of final assessments for the curricular unit. For instance, students can be asked to write an essay answering an essential question by synthesizing textual evidence across the various types of texts. Students could also be asked to create multimodal representations of how they analyze the themes and topics using multiple pieces of evidence from the multitude of texts. Finally, students could be asked to select texts from their own lives and place them in critical conversations with the texts teachers curate. All of these examples position superhero graphic novels as important texts that are deserving of curricular space and rigorous academic analysis.

Conclusion

In situating superhero graphic novels in middle school English classrooms, we are working to challenge "canonizing forces" in middle grades curriculum (Thein & Beach, 2013), disrupt oppressive ideologies about literacy and literature (Torres), and facilitate critical consciousness raising through students' interests (Morrell, 2005). Superhero graphic novels worked to move curriculum away from marginalizing and narrow concepts of English language arts to an English curriculum that opened up "critical conversations" (Schieble, 2012). As demonstrated throughout the article, these aims can be achieved while still fulfilling the requirements of the Common Core or similar state standards.

Superhero graphic novels can rescue our English curriculum from the harmful forces that are replicated too often in our classrooms. English teachers have the power to create classrooms where their students are positioned to make important changes in their own communities and societies even without superhero abilities like those of Spider-Man and Ms. Marvel. Such important changes begin with a critical understanding of how the world operates and how oppressive forces are replicated and enacted in our daily lives. The curriculum we outlined in this article offers suggestions to facilitate conversations leading to such critical understandings. Our hope is that these conversations are the primer for students to take action in their school, communities, and world at-large. Again, even in a landscape that seeks to usurp teachers of their autonomy, teachers still hold tremendous, if not complete, power. And to borrow an adage from the original Spider-Man, Peter Parker: With great power, comes great responsibility.

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Table 1

Superhero Curriculum Overview

Masks, Identity, and Superpowers Unit				
Nonfiction Articles	**Poetry**	**Young Adult/Middle Graces Literature**	**Critical Questions to Consider throughout the Unit**	**CCSS Addressed**
"Into the Spider-verse and the Importance of a Biracial Spiderman" by Richard Newby	"Identity" by Julio Noboa	*Amina's Voice* by Hena Khan	What does it mean to resist? What does it mean to belong? How does the media shape our views of different cultures, groups, and people? What values, structures, or ideologies attribute to systems of oppression? How are those systems of oppression a benefit to some and harmful to others? How do personal experiences and identities aid in interpreting text? How do differences (physical, mental, cultural,) help shape identity? What do people see when they look at me? What do they not see? How do people find and define their identities and strengths?	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.2 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.6 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7 CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3
"'Ms. Marvel,' Muslim Identity and a Changing Hollywood" by Sheraz Farooqi	"Jabari Unmasked" by Nikki Grimes	*El Deafo* by Cece Bell		
"Spider-Man is Back on Screen, but This Time He's Black and Latino" by Javier Tovar	"Masks" by Shel Silverstein	*George* by Alex Gino		
"What the New Ms. Marvel Means for Muslims in Comics" by Gene Demby	"Sonnet" by James Weldon Johnson	*A Good Kind of Trouble* by Lisa Moore Ramee		
"Why are We Obsessed with Superheroes?' by ABC News	"Underface" by Shel Silverstein	*Internment* by Samira Ahmed		
	"We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar	*New Kid* by Jerry Craft		