Graphic Novels and Michigan History

Jenni Renaud

On Friday, June 12, I had the privilege of teaching the Innovator group at Branch Line School in Livonia, Michigan. Branch Line School is a multi-age charter school. Each age grouping has a specific name. The 6th-8th graders are the Innovators.

I explained to the class that I would be presenting two very different subjects and we would try together to combine the information. I deputized one student to be the recorder of the session and trusted her with my iPhone. As youth frequently do, she provided a unique perspective on the hour.

We began talking about graphic novels. I brought my copy of Nick Sousanis' *Unflattening*. Other students provided different manga series to compare and contrast. They explained what they enjoyed about graphic novels and what they found challenging. I showed them examples from *Unflattening* and they were visibly impressed with the parallels to the dramas they were reading and the new material that could be expressed in image. We made a list together of graphic novel attributes including size, subjects, and types. We also discussed terms like "panel" and "gutter." They passed copies around to find pages that showed movement or reflection.

I asked the students to set the books aside and shift gears. I wanted them to brainstorm everything they knew about our fair state of Michigan. Again, we made a list. I was surprised at the range of knowledge and what they focused on. Many zeroed in on the industrial aspects of Michigan, such as the auto industry and Faygo soda pop.

I passed out large sheets of paper and black sharpies. In small groups, I asked them to pick any information from our list about Michigan and develop one page of a graphic novel. I asked them to be mindful of sequence, spacing, and images.

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Photo Credit: Photographs from teaching session.
Not surprisingly, we ran short on time. Some of the finished pictures were quite gratifying. One student had voiced his reservations about graphic novels. He found them difficult to follow and lacking in content. His panels read, "Michigan is an industrial juggernaut. From Ford to Kellogg's to Faygo. If you do not agree it is a juggernaut, look at what products you are using." I told him I was impressed by his insights. He had declared a bold statement and then challenged his reader to reflect. What more could an author of print or graphic novels hope to accomplish?

My time in the Innovator classroom was enjoyable. I was pleased with their willingness to apply a quick run-through of information. I wish I had better articulated the mechanics of how we read and how this can be enhanced by graphic novel texts. Then again, I felt my way through the hour and knew they were ready to move on to the doing rather than hearing me drone on about how the brain works.

I also did not have a follow up with the students to see what they took away. I did have feedback from their teacher who was pleased with their collaborations. Their art teacher was envious of their willingness to dive into an illustration and complete a large surface while she has trouble getting them to commit watercolor to paper over a course of days. I credit the great example of texts we had to examine for inspiration. The genre truly motivated them.

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