What adolescents are reading and what their teachers are not: between the deformed discourse and disdain of the graphic novel

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A first foray: An introduction to one form of high school reading and readers

It was only at the beginning of this year that I realised that I had spent all of my teaching and research life talking with children under the age of twelve years, and even within this group it was mostly with children under six. While I had come to understand a great deal about literacy acquisition (Geekie, Cambourne and Fitzsimmons 1999) and elementary school reading development (Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons and McKenzie 2001), as my own teenage daughter constantly reminded me, all I knew was 'ankle-biter speak'. Determined to change this, I began working with a group of students in a local high school investigating what they were reading and how they were reading, an area that would appear be relatively ambiguous (Signorini 2002) and ill-defined (Manzo 2004). The voices of these high school students have been inserted in this paper as part of an interrogative frame in an attempt to undertake an 'imaginative exploration of possibilities other than those currently available to the child adolescent reader' (Mallan 2001, p. 58)

In my very first interview a 'brave new word' opened up, which I initially thought was in direct contrast to Huxley's *Brave New World* that was being studied in class by some of these students. It was at this time I was genuinely introduced to the graphic novel for the first time, a text type that I had previously thought was nothing more than a glorified comic on steroids. As this initial group of students opened their bags and showed me what they were reading I also recognised that I was now also entering some form of inter-generational reading void. In these texts there was a minimal use of written language, and what was there was a colloquial form that I would not allow in my classrooms or my own children to use. While there was an obvious storyline, the accompanying graphics continually jolted me with their sharp angles, seemingly disjointed images and at times apparently disconnected forms.

> The same stuff is in there, and even more than the books we study in class. You have to look harder. There's more than one way to look at the story, and it's different each time I read them. No that's wrong, its not different, just more involved. (Erin, aged 16)

It was also at this point I realised I had to put my generational censure mindset on hold. With this group of adolescents acting as 'intratextual' guides, I found that the language use, including the forms I did not personally approve of, was in fact mostly piquant and served to make me think more carefully about what was also being portrayed in the often confrontational visuals.

Towards the end of this initial session while I sat and poured over Miller's graphic novel *Sin City* I realised the nature of the reading environment I had now entered when one of these students commented:

I'm seeing the same stuff like in Huxley's book. That guy was thinking like me, but I can't use what I'm reading now in class. I showed my teacher but all she said was I shouldn't be reading comics. (Amy, aged 17)

For the most part their teachers told me that these students weren't reading and were only cursorily engaged with the texts they studied in English classes. To a large extent I found this to be true. That is, these students weren't reading in the traditional sense and they weren't reading what their teachers would consider to be quality text. Their literature was from another time, focused on another space and at times spoke of another 'other'.

Where we have been and where perhaps we should go

I had always believed that children's literature in the traditional sense has tremendous innate power. 'It reaches children's hearts and minds and helps them understand themselves and the world in which they live' (Feeney and Moravcik 2005, p. 21). As I saw it, the vast array of reading material available to students of any age nowadays provides them with so much more than simple entertainment. Books introduce children and adolescents to the very essence of humanity, with all its richness, depth, diversity, sorrow and joy. It is through reading that we are able 'to grasp the unimaginable' (Gleitzman 2005, p. 153). Thus it is the teacher's role to use books and texts of all kinds as a springboard of discussion to challenge the social convention of searching for the single right answer (Lewinson, Mcland and Harste 2000). Does this really happen in an environment that demands the testing of children's answers? How many teachers provide opportunity for intertextual and archi-textual links (Genette 1992) to be made in their classrooms?

I would also argue that literature for children of all ages has undergone a tremendous shift in recent times. A simple wander in any bookshop reveals that books now deal with what I would term existential 'transtextual elements', or the 'double entendres' of life. That is, the polarity or contrast of life: the good and bad, ethics and evil, and light and dark. While Feeney and Moravcik suggest children's stories 'give young children a window on the world outside themselves' (2005, p. 28), I would also argue that children's books also provide an opportunity to wander around inside of self. 'Literature has always been intended to instruct as well as delight' (Sipes 1999, p. 24).

However, after viewing the alternate texts and discussing these with the students whose views underpin this paper, I have to come suspect that herein lies the dilemma for teachers. What is on shelves in bookstores and what students are actually reading would appear to be the catalyst for the development of a generational chasm in regard to what is happening in schools. While I am not making an attempt at 'teacher bashing', I am suggesting that the curriculum driven approach to the teaching of reading and the 'testing equals quality' slant of policy makers in the Western World are only serving to drive a wedge between what is focused on in school and what children are actually reading. Any genuine 'discharge of differences during interaction' Cintron (1991, p. 24) may be rapidly disappearing

More importantly, the widest point of this divide is now how this generation views the world around them and how students are reading this world, reading about this world and reading into this world.

I love English classes and the books we read. But while the things we read about are about me, at the same time they're not. Times have changed and I'm blown away by what I'm forced to read and to think to jump through the exam hoop, but can't comment on or use everything I read, see or talk about. For me the graphic novel is about what we see and feel everyday as a group. Even what we play with on the Xbox. (Peter, aged 17)

Over the past two decades it has been recognised that children born in First World

countries since 1985, often termed Generation Y, have moved away from reading hard copy text into the realm of reading that uses screens of all kinds, shapes and sizes. In particular, computers and movies have become the preferred text of choice for this generation. As Kittleson (1999, p. 3) states, this generation has grown up in an 'unprecedented bombardment of the visual'. Because of the global nature of the communication processes and the rapidity of dissemination, music and associated television clips, DVDs, movies, web-based text and very different forms of hard copy text have become integrated into part of the daily routine and makeup of these viewers in a manner unprecedented in human history (Postman 2003). Again the question arises, how many teachers allow paratextual links (Genette 1992), that is comparison between various text types, as a means of critique and understanding?

While the visual elements of DVDs, videos and the cinema form part of the new 'hearth' (Barnard 2001), as I talked to the students involved in my new lease of research life I found they were also reading hard copy text. However, these texts resembled the visual world and the visual media mentioned in the previous paragraph. The students I spoke with were not only reading graphic novels, but also Manga and novella hybrids that could only be read in the same non-linear fashion as the actual visuals they watched and engaged with.

Here were hard copy texts that demand a new form of grammar, one that needed the traditional sense as well as an understanding of syntactic drag. As I see it, this latter form of grammar requires an understanding of the tools of visual literacy so as to be able to discern the swirl of visual elements contained on every page. As well, there is ability required to piece these elements together through the course of the text in conjunction with the eddy of accompanying visual metaphors and symbols that are connected but constantly changing in form from page to page.

> All the authors of graphic novels do, especially Baez. The pictures and the visuals mostly match but every now and then something is thrown in which is way out there. I think it's deliberate, you know like to pull the threads in of what's really going on but in another parallel. Look at *Sin City* the movie, there were patches of red and characters with yellow. That was deliberate but you have to make it fit, the words, pictures and the other stuff like metaphors. It's the same in these books. Hey I did learn something in English! (Eve, aged 17)

No, these children were not reading traditional texts or using traditional grammar. They were reading at a much higher plane of grammatical use, more complicated and detailed than their teachers could ever imagine.

And so too was the content!

As these students and I poured over graphic novels such as *Sin City, Diabla* and *Finch*, not only did these students make constant inter-textual reference to movies, but here I began to recognise that these texts represented a vast reservoir of untapped generational knowledge and concerns. For example, one student was reading a text that demanded to be read at numerous existential levels both pictorially and at the text level. Ken Smith's (1998) *Otherwise* was one of the most demanding texts I have ever encountered. Here were pages where the text varied from a few lines to several pages. In combination with visuals that drew you in with every turn of the page, this genre focused on the tension between ancient cultures, Christian civilisation and the sense of individualism felt by Generation Y.

> What is true, is difficult and contrary to what human beings want to believe. But what is false is designed to appeal to the illusions of mind and language. (Smith 1998, p. 5)

And where was this text read? Under the table in algebra lessons, under the tree in the back playground, at the coffee shop on a Sunday morning and at home late at night.

Perhaps it was because I was acutely jolted and confronted with what I had seen, but as

we talked, read and debated I began to clearly see that the graphic novels in front of us were clearly based on monsters of all kinds. There were explicit images as well as glimpses, fragments and subtle references everywhere in these pictorial journeys. Dredged up from a dusty shelf in the far recesses of my own intertextual past I began to see that that Cohen's (1998) axiom that we can only understand a culture by the monsters they engender was becoming clearly visible.

Here were texts that spoke of 'category crisis, resistance to change and growth, a policing of the border, the desire of forbidden practices and the revealing of the monster in self' (Cohen 1998). In essence I believe that many of these metaphorical monsters related to very personal issues – discovery of self, gender, sexual orientation, the nature of what is meant by home, happiness and relationships.

> Yeh, they're easy to read, but they touch on what I feel, and the way I see things. Yes there are monsters in these pages, but it's not even what you think. For me the monsters here are in the families that come to my school and the way I'm kept from finding my own feet here. (Wade, aged 17)

Other issues touched on the existential issues that were grounded in the nature of national and spiritual identity. I wondered how many teachers dealt with these issues as part of an English critical literacy program?

As, like many of my teacher peers, I am an 'on the cusp baby boomer', my generational concerns were with the war in Vietnam, nuclear holocaust and apartheid in all its forms. Hence, the monsters spawned by our collective fears are summed in the monstrous ideology of Colonel Walter Kurtz and the demons inhabiting Captain Benjamin Willard in the movie *Apocalypse Now*. When the half naked drunken Willard smashes the mirror in the opening scenes he is symbolically attempting to destroy the generational monster within.

Is this the reason so many students are becoming alienated from school and reading? They fear that their voices and their world view are being ignored by a generation that has little understanding of their world view?

The cosmic generational wheel has turned and the fears of my generation have to a large degree dissipated and new ones have arisen. In parallel, new monsters have also reared their ugly head as they do with every generation. And while Generation Y is known the 'cheery generation' (Plotz 2005), they could also be described as the 'masked generation' (Fitzsimmons 2005) or the 'chameleon generation' (Coupland 1992), as their carefree outlook camouflages a deep psychological fissure of existential angst. They really don't know who they are as individuals or a generation. One only has to watch their movies such as *Scream* or *Cruel Intentions,* or a casual viewing of their 'soaps' such as *Dawson Creek* or *Party of Five* to understand that their monsters aren't external. Their monsters dwell within. Suan Tan's classic graphic novel in guise of hard copy text, *The Red Tree,* clearly shows the dual faces of this generation and the deep sense of loss and depression they feel. Thus monsters of alienation have arisen representing their belief that in their 'first world' experience of having everything, they still possess nothing.

As I talked with the students who started me down this path, I realised that these young adults read these narratives and viewed these stories to pull together the elements of the text and link them together to make meaning of the world they live in and to find answers that touch the soul not the intellect alone. These pictorial journeys, though seemingly simple in construction, promoted intellectual activity rather than the passivity they found to be the norm in the classroom. They found in these texts highly personal and 'unique spaces across, between, and beyond' (Johnston 2000, p. 29). It is within these spaces and gaps that these readers discovered a resonance or the 'narrative thrust' that revealed that they were not alone in their fears and coexistence with the monster.

Perhaps we need to realise that the ideals of reader response needs are not fully implemented in our English classrooms, but we also need to engender intertextual links and comparison with all forms of text found in popular culture.

If we as educators fail to capture the ability to understand and use the discourse of this generation, then not only do we fail to capture the essence of critical literacy, but we will also simply continue to widen the chasm between teachers and students to the point where the contact between teachers and pupils will be akin to shouting across the Grand Canyon with the expectation that there will be understanding and genuine contact. We will then have arrived at Waller's (1932) prophetic concern: that point where the emotional and social distance between teacher and pupil is impassable.

> They cannot know each other, for we can never know a person at whom we only peer through institutional bars. (Waller 1932, p. 28)

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