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Comics have long had a bad rap as a low brow form of children's entertainment, but over the last several years, comics and graphic novels have been receiving increasing attention and respect from educators.

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Japanese comic books and animated films can be used to help students become aware of the social and cultural contexts in which media are produced.

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CML offers a variety of materials in a variety of languages for media literacy instruction.

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The Virginia Department of Education plans to enhance student learning through digital comic creation tools. We also list several resources that can help you integrate comic books and graphic novels into your curriculum.

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In this MediaLit Moment, your students will have the chance to explore the storytelling strategies of a short graphic narrative of the September 11th attacks by an artist who witnessed them firsthand.

Theme: Comics and Media Literacy

In her pathbreaking article on transmediation, the creative process by which stories are ‘translated’ across multiple media and sign systems, Marjorie Siegel observes that traditional classroom instruction has made it difficult to imagine a curriculum in which transmediation can occur. Not only are teachers experts who deliver information to students, the reduction of teaching to “telling” in U.S. schools creates a school culture that leads educators to regard language as the sole channel for learning. Siegel draws on the literacy practices of young children to present an alternative model of literacy learning: “. . .young children turn reading and writing into multimodal events involving drawing, talking, singing, writing. . . .Weaving together symbols of all kinds to represent and convey their meanings makes it possible for them successfully to orchestrate literacy events long before language alone can serve them” (“More Than Words,” p. 457).

What makes it difficult for media literacy educators to gain entrance to many mainstream classrooms is the perception that multi-modal literacy activities are something less than rigorous. At best, it’s considered enrichment, but it’s never part of the core curriculum.

Siegel’s observations certainly apply to comic books and graphic novels. Why don’t they qualify as “serious” literature? Beyond any discussion of themes and content, most detractors will suggest that the visual representations in comics function as an aid—possibly a crutch—in the development of print literacy skills which students should master as soon as possible. From this point of view, comics are alternative or supplemental texts most appropriate for emerging and struggling readers.

Of course, critics do take aim at the themes and content of comic books, and they do so by drawing a lowbrow/highbrow line between comic books and literary classics. In an article for the *Journal of Media Literacy*, Canadian educator Ian Esquivel responds: “For media literacy educators, the low/high debate provides a backdrop for what we normally do. We follow a third impulse. Call it the ‘Wow, that’s cool, let’s take it apart to see what makes it tick’ impulse. We dig through the layers of *The Matrix* like scholars sifting through *The Wasteland*. We legitimize those texts as suitable for study” (*Graphic Novels: A Medium with Momentum*).

In this issue of *Connections*, we introduce you to the use of comic books and graphic novels as tools for media literacy. In our research section, we demonstrate how readers of comic books and graphic novels make complex choices to construct meaning from text, illustrations and conventions of the medium; demonstrate how comic books can be appreciated as works of storytelling art in their own right; and how writing and producing comics can help students develop complex literacy skills and a variety of 21st century skills. We present a research article which traces the development of Japanese comics and animated film (known as manga and anime) in a society which has more readily accepted their cultural and educational potential, and suggest ways for teachers to use them as vehicles for media literacy education. In our resources section, we discuss the development of an innovative program in Virginia

which pairs the techniques of “comic booking” with study of historical artifacts in museums across the state. And in our MediaLit Moment, your students will get the chance to appreciate the depth of the medium as they flip back and forth in the pages of a short first person account of the 9-11 attacks to ask how the artist chose to frame his story and why.

References:

Ian Esquivel, “Graphic Novels: A Medium with Momentum,” *Journal of Media Literacy*, v. 53 (2006). Accessed on 4/16/11 at <http://www.journalofmedialiteracy.org/index.php/past-issues/11-challenges-and-opportunities/169-graphic-novels-a-medium-with-momentum>. No pagination.

Marjorie Siegel, “More Than Words: The Generative Power of Transmediation for Learning.” *Canadian Journal of Education*, v. 20, no. 4 (Autumn 1995), pps. 455-475.

Research Highlights

Comics as Tools for Media Literacy

The decade of the 1950s was not an easy one for the comic book industry in the United States. Wide popular concern about the potentially negative effect of comic books on children led to nationally televised Senate hearings, and the institution of a highly restrictive Comics Code in 1954. Among other things, the horror subgenre was practically eliminated. The words “horror” and “terror” could not be used, and vampires, zombies, werewolves and ghouls could not be portrayed (Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, p. 8-9).

Though the Comics Magazine Association of America successively revised the code through the 1970s, the reputation of comic books as a credible avenue for serious artistic expression had already been damaged. Subsequent recognition of the medium has been relatively slow in coming. In the 1980s, Art Spiegelman experienced many difficulties finding a publisher willing to print the first volume of *Maus*, his oral history of the Holocaust rendered in comic book form. Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize with the release of the second volume in 1992. And yet the “lowbrow” reputation of comics still persists. In 2006, a substantial number of readers were outraged by *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*. All believed that a comic book could not adequately convey the weight of the tragedy of the 9/11 attacks (ibid.).

What is lost in the culture war over comics is the educational value of the medium. Though literacy research on comic books is still emerging, research literature on children’s storybooks, a closely related medium, is much more extensive. In *Storytime: Young Children’s Literary Understanding in the Classroom* (2008), Lawrence Sipe analyzes how picture-text combinations can produce effects greater than that which text or pictures would create on their own. For example, a picture can effectively extend the meaning of the text, or picture and text can resonate with ironic contrasts. Sipe writes, “The best and most fruitful readings of picture books are never straightforwardly linear, but rather involve a lot of reading, turning to previous pages, reviewing, slowing down, and reinterpreting” (quoted in Bitz, *When Commas Meet Kryptonite*, p.13).

A creative graphic novelist will also force readers to “slow down.” The sequencing and presentation of panels is not likely to be uniform. One or more panels could be wordless. One action panel might be stacked on top of a panel which presents a close-up of a character’s face. Another panel could represent a memory in the mind of a character. Readers must recognize a variety of textual and visual cues, use cause-and-effect reasoning, and make inferences about characters’ actions and intentions to arrive at a logical sequence.

Students also learn and apply a diverse ensemble of skills when they produce comic books. They develop character profiles, and make initial decisions about how characters will change over the course of the story. They imagine the words of characters, speak them aloud, and draw word balloons and backgrounds to heighten their emotional content. They build a set of captions to guide the reader and control the pacing of the storyline. They use inking and

coloring to define the tone of scenes within the book. When students work in teams (usually taking roles for writing, illustrating, layout, and inking), they must collaborate to create a piece that is an aesthetic whole. In other words, reading and writing such “lowly” forms of entertainment as comic books requires sophisticated media literacy skills.

But defending comic books as a medium worthy of study obscures one of the greatest benefits of using them as an instructional tool. As the Center for Media Literacy has argued for some time, reading and writing through multiple media can truly engage and empower students. Comic books are an ideal medium for creating alternative worlds, but are also an excellent vehicle for development of characters and stories. Students who produce comics often use the medium to explore different identities and resolve conflicts in an imaginary space (Khurana, “So You Want to Be a Superhero?”).

The Comic Book Project, an organization headed by Michael Bitz at Columbia Teachers College, supports comic book production programs nationwide, many of which offer extended opportunities for community engagement. Students plan and market exhibition events at a variety of local venues, and organize school comic book “cons” (conventions) which draw students from across a city or region. As they write press releases, enlist the aid of community leaders, and coordinate services at conventions, students gain career skills as well as civic and even financial literacy skills.

The personal and creative investment that students make in their comics often translates into a sense of ownership and confidence, especially as they speak about their work in front of an audience. Bitz writes, “Some audience members have asked students to explain their motives for a storyline or to describe their influences. All of a sudden, the students are talking about themselves through their comics – ideas, values, beliefs, hopes for the future, concerns about the neighborhood. Most students are conscious of how their comics address these issues, and they are eager to make those connections for others who might not be able to discern such information from the art and writing” (Bitz, p. 116).

If you’re wondering how you can justify, plan and teach a curriculum which utilizes comic books and how to empower your students through that curriculum, make sure to visit the resources section of this newsletter.

References:

Michael Bitz, *When Commas Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.

Sarita Khurana, “So You Want to Be a Superhero? How the Art of Making Comics in an Afterschool Setting Can Develop Young People’s Creativity, Literacy and Identity.” *Afterschool Matters*, v. 4 (2005), pps. 1-9.

Lawrence Sipe, *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2008.

Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*. New York: Continuum Books, 2007.

Japanese Manga and Anime

In a slow-paced sequence of long shots, a woman travels alone in a ferry down a canal in a nameless Asian city. The audience hears a soprano chorus chanting slowly to the beat of deep drums. She sees another woman in an office cafeteria above her whose face resembles her own. Now she is on a crowded street gazing at the mannequins in a high-end fashion boutique. The lighting and tight angle of the next shot suggests that she could be on the other side of the glass. It begins to rain. This character is not fully human, but a cyborg.

This is also an entirely animated sequence from Oshii Mamoru's 1995 anime film "The Ghost in the Shell," based on Shirow Masamune's 1989 graphic novel (or manga) of the same name. As manga scholar Frederik Schodt writes, "Japan is the first nation on earth where comics have become a full-fledged medium of expression" (qtd. in Napier, *Anime*, p. 20).

Manga and anime are worth studying because they direct us to the social and cultural context in which media are produced. In examining them, we see ourselves "through a glass darkly," much like the character from "The Ghost in the Shell." We recognize much that is familiar, but also find much that does not belong to our own culture and worldview. From this vantage point, we can gain an understanding of our own media culture that we might not have been able to grasp before.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Japanese comic artists began experimenting with the serialized comic strip format that had been popularized in the United States, but manga did not become fully established as a medium in its own right until just after World War II. The watershed event was the publication of *New Treasure Island* in 1947. This manga novel by Osamu Tezuka, often dubbed the "god" of modern manga, was nearly 200 pages in length and sold 400,000 copies. (Ito, "Manga in Japanese History," in *Japanese Visual Culture*, pps. 32-36).

With the advent of the Comic Book Code in 1954, the American public began to perceive comics as a form of children's entertainment. Not so in Japan. In the late 1950s, a group of artists began creating manga which featured realistic drawings and emphasized serious themes. These *gekiga*, or "drama pictures," paved the way for such works as *Barefoot Gen* (1973), Keiji Nakazawa's loosely autobiographical tale of survival in the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing. From the 1950s to the 1980s, manga targeted an increasingly diverse array of readers, and encompassed the entire spectrum of genres, from romance, comedy, and science fiction to history, biography and current events.

In a world where American domination of mass culture is often taken for granted, manga and anime have made significant inroads in the global entertainment market. For example, in 2006, 60% of all TV cartoon shows shown throughout the world originated from Japan (MacWilliams, in *Japanese Visual Culture*, p.14). Japanese anime also captures the attention of audiences through its implicit cultural resistance to American media products. Complex storylines challenge audiences used to the predictability of Disney films. And where Hollywood films often work to contain the anxiety that intractable social issues may elicit, a substantial number of anime films feature open ended, tragic story lines. Many are deeply critical of contemporary technology and society (Napier, p. 33).

Yet Western audiences are also drawn to anime by universal themes and images. A good case in point is Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, an anime film about a 10-year-old girl who must recover her parents from a world full of monster spirits. Chihiro, the protagonist of the story, is a sullen, petulant child who emerges as an unlikely hero. The film beat *Ice Age* and Disney's *Lilo and Stitch* to win the Academy Award for best animated feature of 2002.

Kelly Chandler-Olcott, writing about the uses of anime in the classroom, recommends them for similar reasons. They're remarkably accessible texts for young people because they explore "familiar themes and motifs that cut across various cultures," and they draw on some predictable visual conventions to develop their narratives. Yet they offer students plenty of rich challenges. Students used to "reading" films primarily through plot and dialogue will need to develop their visual media literacy skills, as it is the images in anime films which carry much of the information about Japanese culture, such as myths, religions and artistic traditions. ("Seeing the World Through a Stranger's Eyes," pps. 67-68).

In other words, students don't have to stop at analyzing the lifestyles, values and points of view embedded in anime films, they can learn how to understand and appreciate them as well. As cultural scholar Antonia Levi writes: "American *otaku* [fans] often say that anime's charm lies in its unpredictability, its off-beat weirdness that makes you stop and think about things you never noticed before. In fact, anime is more creative for Americans than it is for Japanese. It's a chance to see the world through a stranger's eyes. . .a view that ensures we'll never look at ourselves quite the same way again" (qtd. in Chandler-Olcott, p.86).

References:

Kelly Chandler-Olcott, "Seeing the World Through a Stranger's Eyes: Exploring the Potential of Anime in Literacy Classrooms," in Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, eds., *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons, and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*, pps. 61-89. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

Kinko Ito, "Manga in Japanese History," in Mark W. MacWilliams, ed., *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations of the World of Manga and Anime*, pps. 26-47. London: M.E. Sharpe, 2008.

Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Mark MacWilliams, "Introduction," in MacWilliams, ed., *Japanese Visual Culture*, pps. 3-25.



Media Literacy Goes Global *and* Local

The upcoming National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) Conference is scheduled for July 22-25 in Philadelphia. This year's theme is Global Visions Local Connections.

The Center for Media Literacy offers its groundbreaking book *Literacy for the 21st Century* in English, Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish. To access the many materials available for K-12 media literacy instruction, including *Globalocal: Media Literacy for the Global Village* co-authored by CML President Tessa Jolls (with Barbara Walkosz and Mary Ann Sund), go to www.medialit.com

CONSORTIUM for **MEDIA LITERACY**

Uniting for Development

About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

www.ConsortiumforMediaLiteracy.org

Resources: Comics and Media Literacy

Teaching Tip: When preparing to assign another written paper, ask yourself, *Could this be more graphics-oriented?* Consider allowing your students to tell their stories using primarily images. They'll gain new perspectives and have fun, too.

Virginia Students Re-Make History with Digital Comic Books

The Virginia Department of Education is currently in the exploratory stages of an ambitious plan to provide Virginia students with the digital tools needed to produce content-specific comic books online. Dr. Tammy McGraw, head of the educational technology division at the Virginia DOE, articulates a vision for the project in which students “. . . would not only have the ability to create, but to share and understand, and to draw from diverse sources; and just as importantly, the ability to use new media to tell stories which would allow them to communicate what they've learned.”

Two years ago, the Virginia DOE began to collaborate with Jim Davis' Professor Garfield Foundation, which operates an educational website, to license and adapt Comics Lab Extreme, the site's comic creation platform. With the help of a third partner, Mashon, which designs user content creation tools for e-commerce sites, the Virginia DOE worked to make the Comics Lab platform available to students to create graphic books. In addition, the custom platform allows students to embed both audio and video files.

According to McGraw, head of the educational technology division, Virginia students have been given the tools to create multi-modal books on a web-based platform: “Students creating these multi-modal books. . . will be able to tie in visual cues that can make their experience much richer. . . students who may struggle to communicate with words will be able to communicate with images, sounds and video. And it can help them to extract meaning from material presented this way.”

As the partnership with the Professor Garfield Foundation evolved, the division of educational technology began to seek out avenues for expanding the conceptual scope of students' comics. McGraw and her colleagues became interested in forming partnerships with Virginia state historical museums, which held considerable numbers of assets (downloadable image files) in their collections, most of which could be accessed with few restrictions. To that end, the DOE partnered with the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, which operates the Jamestown Settlement and Yorktown Victory Center, to create a new Mashon platform which could allow students to combine Professor Garfield templates with assets from museum collections.

The platform was field tested during last year's summer session at three school sites (including one elementary, middle and high school) in three counties across the state. According to Jean Weller, a specialist within the division, “Teachers were enthusiastic, though they had some frustrations with the platform, and the kids were excited and definitely engaged.

And it was the right type of engagement. They really got the idea of communicating using pictures and text.” Among other projects, one student created a guided virtual tour of Washington, DC. The student uploaded vacation photos, and photos from the Library of Congress, including an iconic photo of Krushchev on his visit to DC in 1959, then used a character from the Professor Garfield site to offer commentary at each stop on the tour. Media literacy is an essential component of the project. According to McGraw, “At the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, people were asking ‘What if the kids put together things that don’t fit?’ We responded, we can have activities where students can spot them, and we can teach lessons on that as well.” McGraw and her colleagues decided to tag all assets as well: “The metadata will be there to explain, so students won’t come in without a concept. It’s important for them to recognize what they’re using and make thoughtful choices.”

Additional Resources

Young Adult Library Services Association (<http://www.ala.org>)

YALSA, a division of the American Library Association, publishes a list of recommended graphic novels for teens, and its Young Adult Library Services journal frequently publishes articles on comic books, manga and graphic novels.

Toon Books (<http://www.toon-books.com>)

Directed and advised by Art Spiegelman and his wife Françoise Mouly (a former cartoon editor of *The New Yorker*), Toon Books publishes comic books designed to offer newly emerging readers comics they can read themselves. The site includes a free book reader which voices each character and highlights word balloons as the story progresses; a free digital creation tool which allows users to create three panel comics, and free lesson plans for K-4 teachers.

Professor Garfield (<http://www.professorgarfield.org>)

This site provides a number of games and activities for young readers, as well as the Comics Lab Extreme comic creation tool which the state of Virginia adapted for its students to use in the classroom.

Books

Michael Bitz, *When Commas Meet Kryptonite: Classroom Lessons from the Comic Book Project*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.

This is an excellent resource for teachers who are considering the possibility of incorporating comic books into their curriculum. Bitz organizes the book into chapters which discuss learning theories relevant to each stage of the comics reading and writing process and offer practical perspectives on using comics in the classroom based on the experiences of Comic Book Project teachers. Bitz provides abundant references to research literature, and the end of chapter includes ideas for lessons or units, and lists recommended comic books and web resources.

Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher, eds., *Teaching Visual Literacy: Using Comic Books, Graphic Novels, Anime, Cartoons and More to Develop Comprehension and Thinking Skills*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

This book features contributions from a number of luminaries in the field of comic books and education. Together, these essays justify the inclusion of comics in the curriculum with analytic depth, and offer educators teaching strategies and other resources that can readily be used in the classroom. If you're an educator, you may want to start with the chapter by Jacquelyn McTaggart, which is the most resource-rich essay in this volume.

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993. This is a theoretical introduction to the medium, but it's thought-provoking, entertaining, and it's even presented in comic book form. A classic introduction not to be missed.

Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

This book occasionally lapses into the jargon of the academy, but the author is clearly engaged, if not fascinated by her topic, and the book offers plenty of thoughtful, insightful criticism of a wide variety of animated Japanese films.

Med!aLit Moments

Witness

Why do people write down their memories of tragic events? Every author wishes to preserve those memories somehow, in some form, so that they won't slip away. Beyond that, the reasons for recounting these stories are as numerous as the individual authors.

In this MediaLit Moment, your students will read a short graphic narrative about the 9-11 attacks by an artist who witnessed them firsthand. In reading it, your students will also have a chance to appreciate how a comic artist consciously frames a narrative around his personal experience.

Ask students why a graphic novelist who was in New York on September 11th would choose not to illustrate the World Trade Center under attack

AHA!: The artist who drew this story saw the 9-11 attacks on the World Trade Center close up, but he chose not to include it in the story!

Key Question #4: What values, lifestyles or points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view

Key Question #2: What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?

Core Concept #2: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules

Grade Level: 8-10

Materials: Copies of "Walking the Williamsburg Bridge to Work," a five page graphic narrative by Mo Willems from *9-11 – The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember*, volume 2 (DC Comics, 2002). See graphics on following pages.

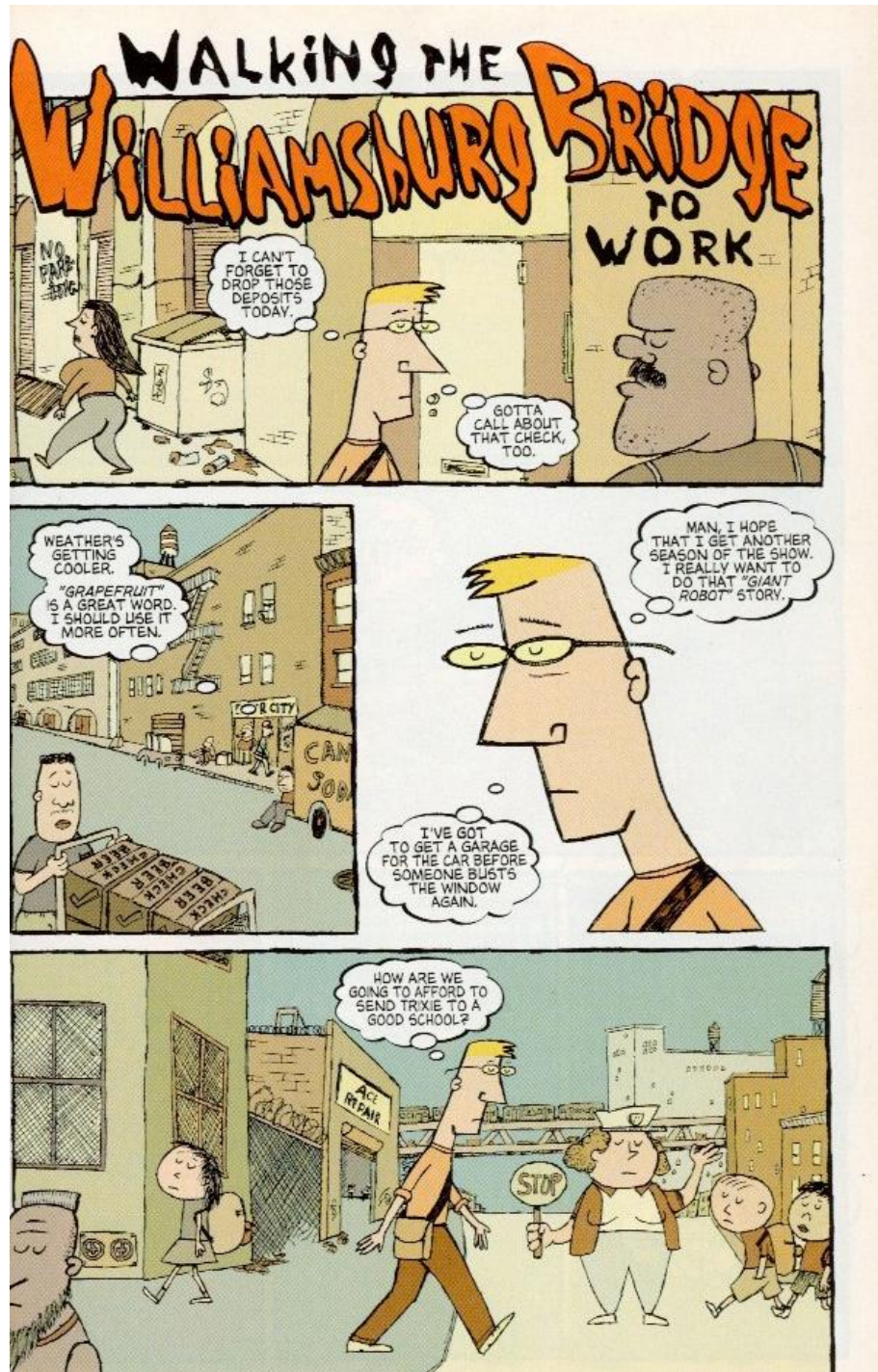
Activity: Pass out copies of the story to individual students or to groups, and allow a few minutes for reading time. Briefly discuss student reactions to the piece. Next, draw students' attention to the third page of the story, in which the main character and everyone around him see the attacks taking place. Ask, why doesn't the artist show the World Trade Center on this page? As students discuss this question, direct their attention to Key Question and Core Concept #4, especially to the question of what's represented in or omitted from a media message. You may also want to ask, what effect do they think the artist intended to have on the reader by leaving the WTC out of the picture?

Extended Activities:

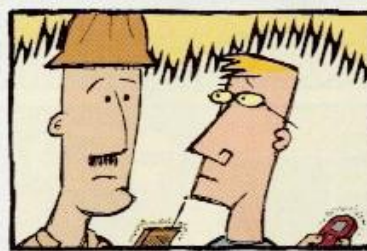
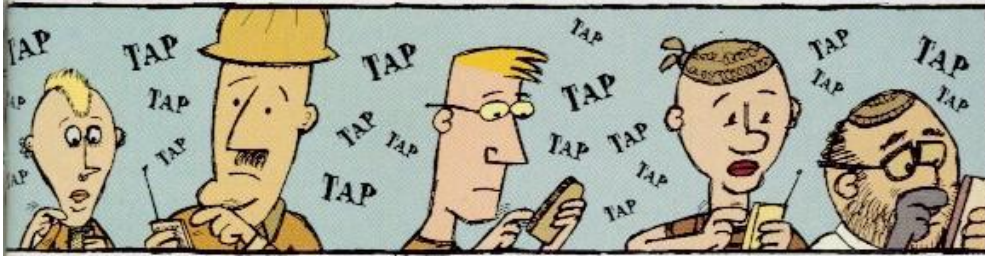
1. Ask students about the purpose of this story. Why did the artist tell it?
2. View excerpts from *World Trade Center* and ask students to compare how the story of 9-11 is told in Willem's graphic narrative and Oliver Stone's live action film.

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2011, Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.com>

Walking the Williamsburg Bridge to Work," a five page graphic narrative by Mo Willems from 9-11 – *The World's Finest Comic Book Writers & Artists Tell Stories to Remember*, volume 2 (DC Comics, 2002).







WHAT'S SOME SERIOUS
T. THAT'S GOTTA BE AT
EAST FOUR STORIES!

I DON'T BELIEVE
IT. I JUST DON'T
BELIEVE IT!

I THINK THE AIRLINE
WAS "UNITED." THEY SAID
IT WAS "UNITED."

THAT IS
NO ACCIDENT.
THAT TAKES
PLANNING!

HOW
ARE DEY
GONNA GET
THAT FIRE
OUT?

MY WIFE
WORKS THERE, BUT
THANK GOD SHE'S
IN FLORIDA.

ALL FOR
FIGHTIN' OVER A
GOD AIN'T NOBODY
EVER SEEN.

I SAW THE FIRST
ONE HIT, AND I SAID TO
MYSELF, "THAT'S FLYING
WAY TOO LOW!"

SOMEBODY
THINKS, "YEAH,
I'M A BIG MAN. I
KILLED ALL THOSE
PEOPLE, LOOK AT
ME!" IT'S SICK,
MAN!

THOSE POOR
PEOPLE...

0.3 PERCENT
OF THE POPULATION
SCREWS IT UP FOR
EVERYBODY.

FROM WALL
STREET! IT'S A TOTAL
PANDEMONIUM!

WHAT FLOOR
DO YOU THINK
THAT IS?

THIS IS
GONNA BE BIG
TROUBLE FOR A
LONG TIME.

I FEEL SORRY FOR
THE ARABS. THEY GONNA
HAVE A HARD TIME
OF IT NOW.

OH MY
GOD...

THIS IS A
MESSED-UP
WORLD, A MESSED-
UP WORLD...

I DON'T EVEN THINK
IT'S ABOUT RELIGION, I THINK
IT'S ALL ABOUT ATTENTION.

IS
THAT IT?
IS THERE
GONNA BE
MORE?



