

RUGG BSU STARS Speaker's notes:

Slide 1: Title & Introduction

Good afternoon. My name is Raymond K. Rugg; I hold a Master's degree in Elementary Education from Bridgewater State University, and I am currently about to complete my Educational Specialist degree and licensure in Reading. My presentation today explores the teaching of adapting prose text to graphic sequential art in 6th-grade ELA writing classes. While the abstract for this presentation anticipates a focus on direct student artifacts, the methodology leans specifically into a Self-Study of Teaching Practice, or S-STEP. To maintain ethical standards of student privacy, this presentation utilizes practitioner field notes and autoethnographic observation to evaluate how the architecture of graphic adaptation impacted cognitive load.

For this lesson, I used my juvenile novel, *Escape from OtherWorld Island*—a science-fantasy adventure in first-person POV—as the source text and the mock-up storyboards for the graphic novel currently in production for the graphic-adaptation elements of the classwork. The images used in the lessons and included in this presentation are panels or details from the graphic-novel work-in-progress mock-ups.

Slide 2: The Problem

The week-long unit consisted of introducing the prologue from my middle-grade science fantasy prose novel, *Escape from OtherWorld Island*, and working with my students through the process of adapting the prose into a graphic-novel format. On Day One of the five-day unit, I deliberately removed all pre-reading scaffolds for this text in order to create friction. It is not unusual for my students to engage in half-hour pre-reads of new text in order to activate prior knowledge and tap into existing schema, but in this case, I told them that they had to read it “cold”—no title, no author, nothing to indicate genre; just a solid block of text. After reading silently and independently, they followed along as I read aloud, and they annotated for three things: unfamiliar words, ‘cool’ words, and action scenes. The final exercise of the day was to choose a specific scene from the text and illustrate it

Slide 3: Theoretical Framework

Referring to Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory, we understand that dense text, such as that involved in speculative fiction, can overload the reader's working memory as the mind is introduced not only to the story, but to world-building that includes a reality other than our own. Moving on to Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, we find that by combining verbal and non-verbal information, we can increase comprehension. Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning bridges these two concepts, exploring the concept that students actively synthesize words and pictures in ways that are more conducive to comprehension than is text alone. And finally, we

increasingly find sequential-art storytelling to be considered a legitimate channel to boost this engagement, as evidenced by recent articles in the National Council for the Teaching of English's trade magazine, *Council Chronicle*, and the academic journal *Research in the Teaching of English*.

Slide 4: Methodology

The unit was taught as identical daily lessons across four 6th-grade ELA writing classes—two general education classes and two inclusion classrooms—each with their own specific interpersonal dynamics and 'vibe.' This allowed for the observation of micro-iterations and the gathering of deeply validated cross-cohort observational data, bypassing the need to harvest individual student worksheets.

Slide 5: The Architecture of Adaptation

On Day Two, the class warm-up involved students re-reading their copies of the prose text while I handed out a 'cheat-sheet' of sequential art vocabulary and concepts. This included definitions of panels, word and thought bubbles, captions, and sound effects—most of which the students were familiar with in practical use, if not the academic jargon. We discussed the terminology as a group to clarify any confusion. I then handed out the script of the graphic-novel adaptation of the prose text, and students read together in small groups. In those groups, students annotated the script by highlighting the panel descriptions, dialogue, captions, and SFX in different colors. The final assignment was for students to use their script to annotate their prose copy, drawing lines in the text wherever the script indicated a new page of the graphic adaptation would begin.

Slides 6 & 7 & 8: The Storyboard & The Gutter

For the Day 3 warm-up, I put a copy of the prose novel's front and back cover in the students' Google Classroom folder and asked them to study it independently for 10 minutes. I explained that if they had possessed the cover before the 'cold' read, they would have had access to much more contextual information. Next, I projected a copy of the graphic adaptation on the whiteboard, and we read it together as a class.

After this first read-through, I highlighted the space between the panels, identifying them as "gutters". I explained that gutters in sequential art are a human innovation in visual communication on par with the use of a zero as a placeholder in the field of mathematics—a concept I confirmed they had recently studied. Scott McCloud's theory of the gutter is the anchor of his 1993 book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. It draws on the psychological concept of closure: the act of observing the parts but perceiving the whole. McCloud notes that the panels are simply fragments, and the gutter—a space with no ink, words, or pictures—is where the reader infers the action. Its presence creates the structure, sequence, and scale of

time for the entire story. The reader is an active participant required to bring high-level inference and mental synthesis to the reading transaction.

I used the analogy of a movie, where frames are run together so fast that the mind perceives continuous action, and reminded them of flip books. I projected a cartoon of a boy holding a water balloon over another boy's head, and then revealed the next panel with the boy drenched and angry. When I asked them what had happened, they easily explained the balloon popped and splashed water on the second boy, even though we didn't see it happen. The exit ticket required students to identify three gutters in their adaptation where time passed and action was implied, and explain what took place "in the gutter".

Slide 9-12: Visual Anchors For Day 4's Do Now, I drew several icons on the whiteboard—ranging from Mickey Mouse ears to Superman's shield—and students had to write down what character each represented. We discussed how they were able to identify characters from a stylized icon, a symbol, or an item. I explained that these visual anchors gave their brains a shortcut to understanding the text. I often discuss how their brain can be like a filing cabinet; when their eyes see a visual anchor, like Frankenstein's neck bolts, their brain opens the 'Frankenstein' file to pull up information on demand. Students then independently studied their graphic adaptations to look for visual anchors for characters or settings, and shared what they identified. Several students, particularly in Blue Group—the 'analytical' class—independently identified exactly those visual anchors specifically and intentionally included in the graphic narrative; Danae's leg brace and bushy hair, and the volcano and palm trees intended to set the scene for 'OtherWorld Island.'

Slide 13: Practitioner Observations

Throughout the unit, my S-STEP field notes captured significant shifts in classroom engagement. Specifically, the inclusion of sound effects served as highly effective auditory and visual synthesizers, immediately clarifying action that prose had failed to make as mentally captivating. Consequently, I observed a distinct increase in independent reading stamina across the board. By bypassing the decoding chore of the dense text, the students were able to seamlessly pivot into intuitive structural analysis.

Slide 14: Cohort Dynamics

The ability to present this unit through four different homerooms allowed me to track micro-iterations in real-time. I was able to implement the exact same visual scaffolds across distinct classroom personalities. The social Yellow group was particularly drawn to tropes such as the exploding volcano and the teleportation portal; analytical Blue focused on depictions of the technology; energetic Red had a particularly productive day engaging with visual cues, and even the often-contentious Green group found the activity of identifying cultural icons compelling enough to override their usual interpersonal friction. But whether a specific cohort leaned into

social dynamics, analytical dynamics, or high-energy dynamics, or even oppositional dynamics, the results were entirely consistent. The dual-code lightening of cognitive load proved applicable across nearly 90 students, validating the architecture of the adaptation.

Slide 15: The Practitioner's Verdict

On our final day, students engaged in a culminating discussion synthesizing setting, character, and action. When asked to evaluate whether enough of the girls' personalities translated from the prose to the page, the consensus was overwhelmingly positive across all classes in the cohort. Furthermore, by encouraging students to consider themselves as 'editorial consultants' of the narrative (in that they were contributing their own ideas of plot and action as they inferred what happened 'in the gutter') rather than passive recipients of a finished text, this unit undermines the 'banking model' of education coined by Paulo Freire, instead empowering the students as active co-creators of knowledge. All in all (and as a strong proponent of the value of prose text in building imaginative and resilient readers), my conclusion is that the strategic application of sequential art can be a profound, research-backed tool for establishing complex world-building and helping to ensure equitable access to rigorous fiction, particularly speculative fiction that incorporates, by definition, components of plot and/or setting that are alien to the lived experiences of the student-reader.

Slide 16: References

Thank you for your time today. I will leave my selected references on the screen, and I would be happy to open the floor to any questions.