

Magic Happens: Graphic Novel Book Club in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

What happened when a global pandemic shut down schools in March of 2020, causing an after-school graphic novel book club to be all but forgotten? Magic happened, when led by a determined instructional literacy coach and a local university professor. Undaunted, they decided to adapt the graphic novel book club into a synchronous virtual experience for third and fourth grade students. The lessons learned along the way about listening, connecting, technology, chance-taking, and superheroes proved to be helpful to their practices as they blazed new trails in delivering education virtually. The authors offer their story and reflections in the hopes to support other educators as they re-frame perspectives and revise curriculum.

Keywords: *Graphic Novels, Book Clubs, Virtual, Elementary, Reading*

What do *Mighty Jack* (Hatke, 2016), *Zita the Space Girl* (Hatke, 2011), an instructional reading coach, a university professor, and 12 third and fourth graders have in common? A virtual graphic novel book club, magic, and loads of fun! We (Kellie and Mindy) met in a reading capstone course and soon discovered that we shared an interest in graphic novels. In fact, Kellie, the instructional reading coach, facilitated a successful graphic novel book club for second graders that was so popular, the students begged for another book club opportunity. Mindy, the university professor, proposed an after-school graphic novel book club at Kellie's school, where the two could conduct an inquiry into the effect the club would have on reading attitudes. Mindy was excited at

the chance to participate in another book club; during her 20 years teaching elementary students and coaching K-5 teachers, facilitating lunchtime and after-school reading and writing clubs were favorite pastimes. Mindy's research interests are teachers' perceptions of popular culture texts (Butler, 2018), and she was eager to return to reading and writing graphic novels and comics with children.

Graphic Novel Book Clubs

Although there is little research about graphic novel book clubs in elementary schools, Boerman-Cornell (2016) investigated the implementation of elementary graphic novel book clubs, meeting with second through fourth graders in a voluntary, lunchtime book club.

Boerman-Cornell (2016) reported that elementary children used multimodal skills to comprehend texts and discussed text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections as they read their graphic novels. Smith (2017), when investigating the effectiveness of after-school book clubs in third grade as an alternative to traditional tutoring, reported that the children made reading gains.

Graphic Novel Book Club Begins

After our in-person book club was approved, we met with 12 third and fourth graders in the school library on Thursday afternoons. We structured the club like a reading/writing workshop (e.g., graphic novel read-aloud, mini-lessons, time for independent reading or writing, snacks, and sharing). Due to snowstorms, snow days, and rescheduled parent events, we met just once during the month of February. By the time of the second meeting in March of 2020, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) was calling for social distancing and warning the public of the dangers of COVID-19. Three days later, all schools were closed, and the book club was forgotten in the midst of global worries.

Graphic Novel Book Club in the Time of COVID-19

Kellie's initial focus was figuring out ways to support striving readers and teachers at home. Her mind raced at night thinking about what else she could do to help. She started taping phonics lessons to support kindergarten and first grade students and recording read aloud/think aloud chapter books for the older students, demonstrating how to think and talk about a book's theme, but it never felt like she was doing enough. Mindy missed the book club, but she was busy converting her in-person classes to online synchronous learning.

Then one night, Kellie remembered the Graphic Novel Book Club. She reached out to the kids in the original club to check on their interest. They were thrilled and eager. Next, Kellie sent Mindy an email to check on her interest and availability to resume the club, and Mindy excitedly said, "Yes!" The club would be virtual and would still

meet on Thursdays. An expanded membership was achieved by inviting all 60 third and fourth grade students to join the club. We were back in business.

Planning for a Virtual Graphic Novel Book Club

Our in-person plans for the club were not going to work online. Students did not have access to new graphic novels, paper, or pens. We planned and we wondered: Would instructional videos of making comics work? Would listening to a virtual read aloud be interesting enough? Would the children participate? What kind of guidelines should we provide? Relying on years of experience in the classroom and a desperation to reconnect with kids to save the day, we planned for a graphic novel read-aloud, time to talk, and time to create and share comics. We had no idea how many children would join our first meeting in April or what to expect, and we were excited at the prospect.

Virtual Book Club in the Time of COVID-19

The first thing that became obvious, as most of our original members appeared along with a few new faces, was that students were desperate to connect. These 25-plus students were relieved to see one another, and they needed to talk with their friends and just hear about what others were doing. We provided the first few minutes of that conversation to them, where they, without prompting, led their own discussion, simply and naturally with adequate airtime for all who wanted it.

Finally, we asked the students if they wanted Kellie to read a graphic novel. *Bird and Squirrel on the Run* (Burks, 2012) was suggested due to club status as a favorite. Conversation around the text was limited, but it was obvious that the students enjoyed revisiting an old friend. Reading was stopped halfway through the book to share the "Comic Creator," a comic creation application available on readwritethink.org, where students can create their own comic strips. We ended the meeting with a plan to meet the following week, hopeful that some students would create comics to share.

Whatever our expectations were for the next meeting, they were surpassed in every aspect. When the meeting began, we had more students curious and eager to check out the virtual book club. Once again, we began by letting everyone chat and share if they wanted; many had pets or new toys they wanted to discuss. It was clear our graphic novel club was far more than just an opportunity to talk about comics.

The remainder of our meetings that spring followed the same pattern. Children came and went as the semester continued. Some who had loved the in-person club stopped coming as the virtual version failed to meet their needs, while others eagerly joined the club and attended meetings consistently. As the weather warmed up in May, and outdoor time beckoned to their isolated bodies, even the regulars seemed to show up late and with less enthusiasm. We called an end to our experiment and announced that our last day would be in early June.

Unexpected Lessons

Listening Lessons

The first thing we learned, which should have been the most obvious, is that student and teacher connections are truly the most essential component in our education system. As an instructional coach, Kellie was producing asynchronous learning opportunities for students and staff each day. Her brand-new YouTube Channel, empty prior to the pandemic, expanded by four to five videos per day. Yet, none of it felt as important or essential as the meetings with students face-to-face via virtual applications.

Hearing students' voices and truly listening to them filled all the participants with hope for the future—hope which in April and May of 2020 was hard to find. Here was a glimpse into their immense capacity to learn despite a complete change of venue, content, and purpose. The students proved themselves to be more resourceful and resilient than previously imagined.

Lessons About Connecting

As we connected with students each week, it became clear the curriculum had changed. We became guides to learning how to participate in virtual meetings, how to create and present work virtually, how to practice truly listening to each other under the worst of circumstances, and most importantly, how to keep trying. By finding a way to have our meetings and being there every week, we modeled for these students how to carry on despite adversity. Mindy felt very fortunate to participate in the magic that Kellie created when she gathered the children in this after-school graphic novel book club. The fact that Kellie pulled off this magic act during a global pandemic and emergency teaching was phenomenal. Within this partnership with Kellie, Mindy learned the value of authentic, intentional listening and the value of reaching out to children who were in lockdown, to children who could not have their friends over to play, and who longed for connections with their friends and their teachers.

Technology Lessons

Next, we noted how technology could and should be used as a tool to connect students to each other and their teachers. Technology is a tool, like a pencil, which needs to be used not as a distraction to fill space and time, but instead taught properly and then placed into its rightful place in the communication toolbox of every child in the world. Students need us to prepare them for that world. They need to be connected to technology that asks them to do the creating and thinking, not just answering questions. It is essential that we incorporate the soft skills that will be necessary for success in the 21st century into our daily instruction.

Lessons About Chance Taking

Finally, in this new world for educators, we learned to take a chance. When the idea of meeting virtually was put in motion, it was unclear if our plans would work or meet students' needs. Plans were created, but they were sketchy and only fit for one week at a time. It was likely that some of the students were going to be more adept with the technology than their teachers. And that was more than okay,

because it offered students a real chance to experience adults taking risks at learning. For years, educators dramatically produced one act scenarios where we struggle to spell words or solve math problems, fooling no one. The pandemic made us co-equal learners with our students. We taught about perseverance as they watched us overcome real academic struggles.

Lessons About Superheroes

This remote book club, although not in our initial plans, was just the vehicle to keep these

young readers and writers connected with each other, all through the magic of reading and writing graphic novels. Resilience, communication tools, time management, and added value on the soft skills and interpersonal connections between teachers and students seem like a lot to learn from a graphic novel book club that was supposed to last only six sessions. Then again, we were talking about superheroes right from the beginning, and who better to teach us a few super lessons about 21st century education?

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