EXPLORING THE POSSIBLE STIGMAS OF COMIC TEXTS IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS: GRAPHIC ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

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ABSTRACT

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This humanities-oriented, action-research dissertation is a study of the degree to which stigmas may have played a role in students' approaches to comic texts used in two different college courses. It also shared the complexities the author battled in his own experiences as a comic text reader and educator. Much of the driving force behind the studies within the dissertation stemmed from the author's own battles with stigma, including a book banning event that centered on his high-school classroom library. In the research chapters, pre- and post-reading surveys were given to adult college students to examine their position on using comic texts in an academic setting. The teaching methods used in correlation to the comic texts were considered in regards to their impact, both positive and negative, on the engagement level of students, and the associated implication of stigma towards comic texts shown via the differently taught events. The complexity of recognizing stigma related to comic text is a key consideration throughout the piece.

Keywords: comics, comic strip, comic books, graphic novels, reluctant readers, struggling readers, stigma, teaching, pedagogy, methodology, book banning

To my wonderful family. Thank you so much for doing all of the heavy lifting while I was at play. I wish I could put this in the happy jar.

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I remember the excitement I felt as a child of six, seven, or even ten years old, when it was time to go grocery shopping at the small family-owned market in my hometown. My mother would gather her purse, grab the keys to whatever weather-beaten piece of rust we currently called a car, and we would drive the half-mile to Estey Market. There were no seatbelt laws in my memory and I remember bouncing around on the large bench seat with a youthful anticipation. Mom would gently go over the rules: 1. Remember to be polite and respectful. 2. Don't go anywhere with strangers. 3. Take great care with anything you touch. The rules seem so much simpler now. I wonder if it had anything to do with simpler times.

When we'd open the market door, a loud bell would sound, announcing the arrival of customers. Whoever was working the cash register that day would usually look over and share some sort of welcome. Mom would get a shopping cart and be on her way about the store. I was trusted to remember the rules and stay where mom knew I would be, near the front of the store looking at comic books.

The comic book rack was as old and beaten as most of our cars at that time. It was a red, metal rack that would spin slowly in a circle when turned by customers. It reminded me of our "Lazy Susan" at home. In even my earliest memories, the various brackets for holding the comics were already bent, dented, and worn. When spun, the rack would moan and groan with two unique squeaks. One squeak was low and seemed to change notes subtly as the brackets spun slowly around. The other squeak was a much higher pitch with emphasis at the end of the sound. It was this rack and these noises that provided many of my favorite memories as a child.

It wasn't very often that we could afford to spend money on a comic book. As fortune would have it, comic books weren't covered by food stamps and there seldom seemed to be

enough money after my parents divorced. However, the market owners didn't have a problem with me standing in front of the comic rack reading everything I could manage to fit into the time mom spent shopping. In those days, it was DC Comics that earned most of my attention and, in a normal shopping day, I could fit in the reading of six or seven comics easily. I remember thinking how lucky I was that my mom shopped so slowly. Only as an adult, reflecting back on those times, did I consider maybe it didn't have so much to do with luck, but quite a bit more to do with her understanding. My mother understood how much I enjoyed reading comic books and she'd spend quite a bit of time reading and comparing the labels of things we never seemed to buy. Luckily, every so often the stars would align and I would be allowed to buy a comic book. That didn't happen often, definitely not every trip or even every other trip, but when allowed, I would pick one comic and put it ever-so-carefully in the shopping cart.

I can't remember the age when I started to wrestle with good and evil as presented in comics, but it happened in front of that red comic rack. I knew Batman was supposed to be good and the Riddler was supposed to be evil. However, I didn't really understand why. Batman scared me as a child. He was dark and menacing. The villains he fought mostly seemed more comical than evil. The Riddler's shtick was usually some form of asking questions and stealing money. He didn't seem mean and wasn't very scary. I was able to puzzle out that he was the bad guy because he stole money. However, Robin Hood stole money and he was a good guy. Even now puzzling out a clear good and bad is often a bit murky for me. I suppose the first time I wrestled with questions of ethics and reasoning I was standing at that squeaky red rack and there was a comic book in my hand.

When my mom decided to remarry, my new step-father brought a strange disdain for reading. He commented often that I read too much and it would hurt my eyes and make me lazy.

I don't have even a single memory of him reading during any point of my life. Books, it seemed, were bad enough in my stepfather's eyes. Comic books? They were worse. While my comic reading seemed to annoy him, when I'd ask him questions like, "Why?" he would become infuriated. However, that's where mom drew a strong line. She stood up to him when he said I should get rid of my comics and stop wasting time with them. The murkiness I spoke about earlier seemed clearer for me at that point. Mom was a good guy; my step-dad was a bad guy. I realize things are seldom that simple, but I haven't had a feeling stay with me from my childhood that was clearer than that foundational labeling of good and bad I created for my parents in that situation and their positions about me reading comics. I enjoyed reading comic books very much. They did more than offer an escape from a broken family, a life of poverty, labels and stereotypes. They allowed me time to wrestle with my thoughts and craft questions that didn't have quick, simplistic answers. What if Superman decided to take over the Earth? How would we stop him? I suppose I was worried some strong, imposing male figure might try enforcing their will on my life and I was all out of kryptonite. Luckily, I didn't need kryptonite since I had my mom.

As I progressed through elementary school I had similar experiences. Some of my teachers didn't mind that I would bring comic books to school and read them during my free time. Other teachers, however, reacted like my step-father and wouldn't allow comic books in their classrooms. It's interesting to me that the word "their" fell so effortlessly in place in the last sentence. Especially since I have some idea regarding how this dissertation will likely end. As for the teachers who wouldn't allow the reading of comics, well, they seemed an awful lot like my step-father. They believed their way was the one-right-way for everyone. And, they'd impose that if they could, even with corporal punishment. They also seemed to hate it when I'd

question them with my asking of why. I can't read comics in your class? Why? You think they're a waste of time and will rot my brain, because they are trash. Why? At the elementary school I attended, the paddle was long, wooden, and named George. Students who acted too far out of the expected line, or asked why too often, would be told to stand in front of the class, palms on the chalkboard, while being "taught" their lesson by George. Those teachers, who held onto control so tightly, I started to label the bad guy also. They were supposed to be the good guy, help children learn, escape from illiteracy and poverty, but they could be scary if you disagreed with them, sort of like Batman I suppose. The teachers who let students like me have choice in what we read, and allowed us space to share it with others, without threat of George's lesson, I labeled the good guy. The memories of these experiences haven't seemed to weaken as I've grown older. In fact, they've helped me quite a bit with my own teaching philosophy and intended approach in the classroom. However, I'm not sure what leads a person, whether my step-father or some of my teachers who thought like my step-father, to make their choices. It was confusing to me that the people I thought were obviously bad guys, didn't see themselves that way. That's a question from my youth that I still haven't been able to riddle out as an adult.

Years later, as a high school teacher, I had the learning experience of having my classroom library involved in a book banning event. The administration of the school I taught at decided some of the titles and genres in my classroom library were too risqué and highly inappropriate for high school juniors and seniors; however, none of the books were required reading for any particular class or student. My classroom library, numbering roughly a thousand books at the time, was unceremoniously pulled from the hands of students and locked up in various cupboards and storage closets. Without sharing all of the painstaking details of the banning event here, I'll share the following: I fought for weeks and almost won. Many of the

books ended up being tolerated by the administration and returned, but there was a handful of books that didn't survive the banning event and were removed from my library. However, the entire genre of graphic novels in the collection was questioned and removed. During the tumultuous weeks of battling to get my classroom library accepted, the school district's superintendent commented, "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" That off-hand statement seems to approximate the essence of the professional stigma, when it's apparent, of using comic related materials in learning environments. Frankly, it haunts me a bit still today, "What kind of idiot…" and I'll talk more about this in coming chapters. However, once again, the good guy and bad guy issue was murky. I thought I was the good guy, but I was being treated like the bad guy. I thought they (the book banners) were the bad guys; anyone stopping students from enjoying books of their choice had to be playing the role of the bad guy in my mind. Yet, they seemed to think they were the good guys. It was strange how confusing good and bad could be. That hadn't really changed much since I stood at the red rack with comics in my hands.

When I sit back and wonder about how bringing comic texts into a classroom could lead to negative commentary about teaching or reading, I usually end up thinking about how society has often treated comic texts. A year or two ago I reviewed a submission for the *Journal of Literacy Research* that dealt with the use of comic texts in a K-12 special education classroom. The author of the article, who was anonymous to me as a reviewer, was proposing that comic texts were useful for helping special education students engage with reading because special education students needed items that were easier to read than traditional texts. The author proposed that since comic texts used pictures, colors, boxes for organization, and so on, they were easier to read than traditional, text-based items and just right for special education

classrooms since students could look at the pictures when struggling with the reading. The concept that special education students needed something easier felt like calling them slower, dumber, and less capable then other students. It felt like that's something a bad buy would do who was pretending to be a good guy. More recently, I sat in an orientation session at the small community college where I teach and listened to a guest speaker talk about ESL students. One of the tips the speaker gave us was to allow ESL students to read something easier than the challenging texts our courses may require. His suggestion was to allow these students to read something easy to read and grasp, like comic books and graphic novels. It was becoming a trend to hear people talk about comics as something struggling students needed to make their lives easier. These events speak symbolically of how I believe the superintendent of my school felt justified in questioning the place of comic texts in a classroom and likely how my step-father felt when sharing his disapproval during my youth. The manuscript author, visiting ESL speaker, my step-father, and a host of teachers from my past, join the superintendent in perceiving comic texts as being simple, unsophisticated, and unchallenging. I tend to disagree with this easy-simplistic approach for two foundational reasons: 1) I've spent a lifetime at the red comic rack battling complex thoughts such as the line between good and evil. 2) I want very badly to be like my mother and stand between the people saying no and the children who love reading and thinking their way through the complex colored pages of comics while pleading yes.

One semester, I used the Moore and Gibbons (1987) graphic novel, *Watchmen,* in an American Studies course at the small, rural community college at which I teach. This comic text isn't a common piece of comic work in its field. *Watchmen* is held to be one of the seminal pieces of comic text art that began a turn in the field toward which comic writers and artists began setting the bar higher in their trade. Tabachnick (2007) said that *Watchmen* is "known as

the Ulysses of the graphic novel for its subtlety, stylistic variety, philosophical reach, and depth of characterization" (p. 25). It was one of the first comic pieces that shared the struggles its heroes had in their personal lives and the various traumatic events they had to deal with throughout their daily experiences and, as pointed out by Blake (2010) has been a standard in the comic field since. I regret I never came across this on the red comic rack of my childhood. Oh how I would have loved wrestling with this as an engaged reader in my youth. Since the focus of the course was exploring cultural myth in national identity building, I was using *Watchmen* to explore the mythos of American culture, exploring beliefs and complexities regarding such things as safety, patriotism, violence, and questioning our heroes as crafted within the framework of our national psyche and history. In short, I was asking students to engage in the same battle I had engaged with for decades: What makes good guys the good guys, the bad guys the bad guys, and why? Anyone who has read the *Watchmen* understands the perfect fit that text offers in those regards. Therefore, using this comic text seemed a good fit as it also explores these myths to a very complex depth. Nothing about my choice to use *Watchmen* was due to it being simple or easy. In fact, a colleague once pointed out to me that she struggled with *Watchmen* herself due to the complex density woven throughout the piece and I'll speak more to this in the latter parts of this dissertation.

While there were various texts used within the course, the students had different levels of engagement and/or avoidance with the graphic novel. I began the course with an anonymous survey asking questions about the texts we were planning to read in the class. On those beginning surveys, none of the students shared any serious misgivings about being asked to read *Watchmen*. A handful of students even shared their excitement with trying a genre that was new to them. I wondered if any of them had memories of their own, standing in front of an

assortment of books, maybe even comic books, wrestling with their own thoughts as their version of the red comic rack slowly spun. However, when the time came to begin reading and engaging with the piece, student engagement and participation drastically declined. I hadn't expected this and wondered then whether the lack of engagement was related to a cultural or societal stigma of some sort playing out in the classroom environment, or whether it was related to something else. What if the people in their past forced them to read comic books when they didn't want to? That would be the same type of experience I had, but approached from the other direction. What would that mean for them in terms of the murkiness of telling good guys from bad guys? Whatever the cause and reason, there was a noticeable disconnect between what students said on their beginning-of-semester surveys and their actual participation with the comic text. In short, the overwhelming majority of students didn't read, engage, or seem to attempt working through the comic text, and as an instructor, I don't know why they didn't read the text. As a teacher and researcher, this disconnect was an important point of focus that has been driving this inquiry of my research. However, as a young boy in front of a rack filled with comics, I'm left puzzling out who was the bad guy in their story.

Anecdotes like these, the ones I have shared that stem from my own classroom comic text experiences or listening to speakers or administrators speak negatively about comic texts, seem to permeate the landscape of comic texts whether in academia or as a cultural artifact. It seems that there is a small—but important—thread of discussion in contemporary scholarship addressing comic texts (comic strips, comic books, trade paperbacks, and graphic novels, to name some common examples) that considers stigma related to the readers of the texts or the texts themselves as artifacts (e.g., Baetens, 2008; Botzakis, 2009; Lopes, 2006). I had experienced this as a child, as an adult, and as a teacher. This comic text stigma, in a loose

explanation of its encompassing, seems to share that the comic texts themselves are often castigated as a lowbrow genre, often requiring very little thought, which also adds to or plays upon the perceived social ineptitudes of the comic text readers themselves. It wasn't just that the bad guys from my youth thought comic books were trash, but that I must be trash if I was allowed to read them. Those considerations, against the genre and reader, seem to lead to the social commentary like that shared in the examples presented earlier.

The specifics of this stigma thread and the surrounding discussion will be explored more throughout the remaining chapters that comprise this dissertation. At this point, however, introducing the focus of stigma— or perhaps more appropriately, *stigmas* — related to the comic text genre should be an appropriate starting point for exploring the various perspectives, perceptions, and considerations of stigma since they are fairly complex and probably do not fit nicely, in terms of systematic organization and academic clarity, under one all-encompassing banner. Not everything is so clearly cut as to say who or what is good and who or what is bad. Things are sometimes still murky. That is not to say I won't attempt to untangle these threads just a bit for a better look later in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

What Talk of Comic Text Stigma?

It's worth pausing to mention that that there are different styles and sub-genres within the comic field since we use different terms and phrasings when talking about comic texts. Without going too far into the division and separation of each style, I feel it might be useful to help explain the scope and use of my chosen phrase of *comic text* when I use it. Under the umbrella of comic text, I am referring to many subgenres including but not limited to the comic strip (like those in local newspapers), the comic book (the often monthly on-going serial story that filled

the brackets on the red comic rack of my youth), the comic trade paperback (a collection of usually four to six comic books that entails a certain story arc bound together in one, sometimes hard-cover, binding), and the graphic novel (a stand-alone story outside the arc of serial comics that visually looks very much the same as a comic trade paperback). I understand that some writers have chosen different terms and phrases to encompass these various sub-genres and may even add other elements to their own phraseology (e.g., graphica, sequential art, pictorial stories, or other such phrases) for their own reasons. I've chosen to use the phrasing of comic text for a specific reason. I'd like the phrase to elicit thinking of comic books and comic strips as well as other comic mediums, instead of racing straight to graphic novels or trade paperbacks. Thus, those subgenres of presentation all come together, equally, under one label that I address in this piece as comic text. I share this because the sub-genres themselves are not synonymous or interchangeable to the avid comic text reader and as such, I feel they shouldn't be mistaken as synonymous within scholarly research regarding such texts.

A comic book is not the same as a graphic novel, a comic strip, and so on. I feel this is important to highlight because the assumption that all subgenres of comic texts are the same may very well be one of the root causes of the casting of stigma across the genre as a whole. However, another reason I chose the phrase comic texts to discuss the various presentational styles of comics is that many people may be used to traditional word-based text (like books, novels, newspapers) and visual texts (like paintings, hieroglyphics, logos) as distinct and separate. Thus, in combining them in efforts to show the word and visual sharing the responsibility of literacy on the page, I find the term comic text both different and befitting as a new type of text to consider. Comic texts are something more than words on a page with pictures. They aren't exactly the same as reading a novel and aren't exactly the same as looking

at a painting. They require their own style of literacy to navigate effectively. Wolk (2007) explained this concept of comics being different than word-based text or visual-based text:

> Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they're not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciate comics is acknowledging that. (p. 14)

Discussions orbiting comic text stigma in academia seem to ebb and flow through areas such as the cause of such stigma, ways to battle the stigma, or even to question the weakening of the stigma. I see in current literature two major threads: a thread of discussion considering comic text and comic reader stigma, and another thread considering comic texts' increasing acceptance. Considerations of these areas, as discussed quite briefly previously in this chapter, pointed out the view that comic texts lead to various negative considerations. It's as if those elementary teachers of my past, who tried to stop me from reading comic texts, joined with my step-father and magically became a point-of-view that infected other people. As an example of the first thread, Botzakis (2009) shared some of the negative viewpoints attacking comic texts: "At best they have been seen as a childish diversion and at worst, as texts that deaden intellect and moral reasoning, linked with juvenile delinquency and a host of other social ills surrounding young people" (p. 50). While the comic texts themselves seem to carry the brunt of the villainy, if such a thing truly exists, of "why" they are stigmatized, some scholars have expressed concern that the stigma then carries over onto the readers themselves. Lopes (2006) explains:

> Goffman … in his classic work Stigma argued that a stigmatized person's social identity is discredited by the power of a single attribute, such as being visually impaired or a drug

> user. He also argued that such individuals may be viewed as deserving of some kind of intervention. (p. 387)

For Lopes, the social identity that discredits comic texts readers seems that they are comic text readers, not, of course, Goffman's blind people or drug users. I was often discredited as a young-student or simply as an adolescent because I read comic texts that were themselves discredited to some people. Yet, why do I remember such comfort and safety standing in front of the comic rack? My guess is that it offered me a method of escape even though it was an activity being stigmatized. Lopes (2006) went on to explain, "My interest in popular culture and stigma stems from my research on comic books in America. In reading histories, interviews, columns, and other writings in the subculture of comic books, I found the multiple levels of stigma to be quite remarkable" (p. 388). Thus, the elements that have pointed toward stigma in comic texts are varied and vast. Yet, whether right or wrong, I still have a quick, overwhelming urge to label the anti-comic text crowd as the bad guys based on that one position. Of course, a lifetime of experience has taught me that some labels may fit, others may not, and our perspectives may change. I still wonder though, why didn't other people see Batman as a bad guy who simply chose to fight other bad guys?

Interestingly, while there is some talk of stigma related to comic texts and their readers today, there also seems to be a growth in the acceptance and use of comic texts today, *even* in education. Baetens (2008) presented the idea:

> The spectacular cultural upgrading of comics—first ignored by academics, yet eventually embraced, though not as comics *per se* but as 'graphic novels'—illustrates, however, that hierarchies are never fixed. The graphic novel now has its own journals, its own conferences, and even an MLA handbook. (p. 95)

While there is some feeling of this growth dancing in and out of discussions about comic text, the exact cause of this growth is uncertain and a point of debate, but that cause is not the focus of this dissertation.

The second thread hints at an increase in pedagogical value of comic texts in the classroom as an indicant of comic text acceptance. Berkowitz and Packer (2001) proposed, "Comics and cartoons provide a wealth of pedagogical opportunities. By placing comics in historical, aesthetic, educational, and empowering contexts, we present a new approach to using these materials…" (p. 12). Bucher and Manning (2004) seemed to concur with this idea, adding, "Graphic novels represent one of the most popular and fastest-growing types of young adult literature. … Because young adults should be encouraged to read what interests them, graphic novels belong in every school library. They also should, when appropriate, be incorporated into the school curriculum" (p. 67). It's interesting, however, that even when considering the gradual acceptance and utilization of comic texts, the discussion often reverts to those who still stigmatize the genre. Notice that Bucher and Manning presented that comic texts belong in school libraries and curricula. They might be crafting a new "acceptable use" policy, albeit accidentally, that creates a norm saying comic texts are only suitable for school aged children, which could inadvertently add to the stigma that comics are simplistic and infantilizing. However, even as I consider that, I admit that some comics may actually be simplistic and infantilizing. However, those aren't symbolic of all comic texts. I understood this as a child. Even with my questions about Batman, I still read any issue of his I could find and wrestled with the questions I formed. I would, however, avoid Archie comics like the plague. I didn't get all the goofy high-school drama and kissing. This may all be stretching the intentions of the sources in this discussion a bit, but it's important to consider that this may be an example of how any

associated stigma could have originally formed out of accidental implications. For example, Bucher and Manning seem to concede the following: "Too often educators exclude graphic novels solely because of the format on the erroneous impressions that all graphic novels focus on supernatural horror stories or are expressions of the male power fantasy" (p. 68). Of course, this is quite a different stigma than that of comic texts being infantilizing. Thus, there is some disagreement about why comic texts are stigmatized or excluded.

Notwithstanding some scholars' assessment about the reception of graphic novels, it's difficult to know exactly how to enter into this fold of discussion, stigmatized or not, with questions or concerns regarding our own limitation of the scope and acknowledgement of our experiences related to, and possible added to, issues of stigma in the genre. Frankly, I'm not overwhelmingly convinced we need another study that talks about the previous studies and previous experiences of past students, teachers, and readers if we want to question anything about stigma *today*. I can speak at length about what it felt like as a child of the 70s and 80s to read comic texts, to wrestle against my step-father's position on comics, to battle my elementary teachers with on barrage of "Why?" that end with their, and my, frustration. Although, I'm not sure what that would tell us about today. That's where the seedling of my action research framework began and how I decided to focus my study on current students' attitudes about comic texts in a humanities-oriented framework.

This research is intended to add to the current discussion of stigma in comic texts through the use of action research in my own teaching in response to student reactions. I feel this study is warranted as it will help add a contemporary voice to what runs the risk of becoming an area of discussion that looks back historically *at* stigma instead of looking around presently *for* stigma, or even recognizing and acknowledging its absence. To be clear; I'm not proposing that since

the comic text readers are discussing their own experiences with stigma that their voice or position isn't valid. I argue quite the opposite. Instead, what I'm trying to add to the discussion around stigma is how the genre and/or readers are stigmatized today, *if* they are stigmatized today— based on their contemporary attitudes, experiences, and cultural tendencies— if only to add complexity to the aspects of discussion that are based on the reminiscence of comic text stigma by adding more contemporary positions to the discussion. What better gift might I give my younger self, standing in front of the comic rack, than something that shows he isn't alone and that there are good guys who still fight against injustice, if it still exists?

Complicating this a bit is the obvious addition of my own bias, no matter how I may try to wrestle it in. Part of me wants to ask the question, "Why would I want to wrestle it in?" It's fairly clear that I feel that I was stigmatized by some of my teachers and some of my family as a child for reading comic texts. Why am I expected in some circles to shut that experience away, as if it isn't important? My past is filled with experiences, some clear, others still murky, that I'm unashamed of adding to this discussion. Beyond my past, however, there are my current experiences. Interestingly, my children don't seem to be experiencing a related stigma at home or in their schools. I remember the looks, sighs, comments, and offhand jokes made at my expense simply because I held a comic in my hand. I remember all of these, actually felt all of these, quite clearly. Why they occurred is still murky though. I find myself remembering and reliving the stigma of my youth, but am not sure whether comic text readers today are experiencing the same types of battles that I navigated. However, there seems considerable discussion in academic literature that comic texts have been associated with stigma (Baetens, 2008; Botzakis, 2009; Lopes, 2006). I remember experiencing some of the stigma forms often discussed within the topic of comic texts, but—and this is where my inquiry seems to complicate

itself—I'm not sure I still experience them currently at the same level today that I did two or three decades ago or whether new generations of comic text readers are experiencing something different. Where are today's children standing at their own red comic racks? What are their voices and thoughts saying? This is where the personal importance of this inquiry comes to bear for me: Educators can benefit from hearing more voices and learning from others' experiences in our comic text discussion to see what people are thinking and feeling regarding their experiences with comic texts. With fuller understanding of such experiences, we as literacy teachers are better equipped to be responsive to a diversity of students with curricular options. Instead of playing the role of the villain who locks away a genre because we aren't accepting of it.

This dissertation aims to consider the experiences of stigma, if they still exist, in different classroom experiences. First, it will explore the book-banning event experienced in the high school setting outlined briefly earlier to craft a framework showing the complex nature of the administration's position and the various reactions to it. This event will offer a conceptual foundation that begins the framing for the chapters that follow it. Second, the dissertation will explore the utilization and reception of the use of the now seminal comic text, *Watchmen* (1987), considering how it was engaged with and/or received in a collegiate classroom setting. Finally, it will consider college students' reactions to working with a cartoon comic text from cartoonist Lynda Barry during a college freshman composition course. The need for humanities-oriented action research studies hopefully seems apparent, especially when considering that many of our colleagues engaged in the discussion of comic text and stigma currently are explaining the production or reproduction of stigma, when perhaps we should be asking whether the stigma is still as culturally ingrained in the social identity of the comic text, comic text reader(s) and

educators as it was in past experiences. Finally, the dissertation also us the humanities-oriented approach to wrestle with the notion of good and bad in comic texts, classrooms, and teaching.

Exploring Stigma in Comic Text Discussion

There are multiple generations of discussion permeating comic texts that focus on a variety of issues like stereotypes, gender roles, sexuality (e.g., *How large should Wonder Woman's breasts be drawn? What is the role of homosexual superheroes? Does reading comics hurt a child's ability to improve reading?*). Instead of considering each generation of discussion in turn, the focus herein will be on those few pieces that consider any stigma associated with comic texts. This isn't to say that other foci or past generations of discussion are any less important. I don't feel they are less important and wouldn't accept that premise. Instead, since the content and various topics are broad in nature, I focus on the single issue, stigma, which has seemed to most impact my own thinking and experiences with comic texts as both a reader and teacher as much as they did for me as a young reader finding meaning in the brackets on the rusty red comic rack a few days each month. The importance of considering the stigma of this genre is that in understanding why society may view the genre as some cartoonish or lascivious taboo, we can begin to consider the cultural production or systematic reproduction of the stigma or begin to consider whether the stigma itself has changed over time, even exists any longer, or can be battled against. If our students engage with comic texts—engage, question, learn and think—why wouldn't we use them? Perhaps because our various colleagues and administrators wonder, "What kind of idiot would have high school seniors reading comic strips in class?" and we're still worried about earning a stigma ourselves. Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys in the literacy worlds of contemporary classrooms?

Initial consideration of a stigma that permeates the comic texts starts with the assumption that these works fall somewhere on a spectrum of stigma that includes the opposite sides of infantilizing and lewd and likely a third area of frivolous. In all of my time spent in front of a comic rack, or at home with comics in my hand, I've never labeled comics in those ways. It seems, however, that these areas of stigmas don't even agree or align in their reasoning. It may help to frame these areas better before exploring them. First, there seems a point of stigma that comics are childish (the infantilizing thread) and as such, intended for young children and young readers with special-needs in our schools. This area of stigma would say that the comic texts aren't developmentally appropriate for older students or adults, much like my step-father and certain teachers said. Second, there seems to be some stigma that claims comic texts aren't appropriate for students or children because they are lewd and sexually explicit. In some cases, I willingly admit that's true. However, a large number of comics are in no way lewd or sexual. This claim may stem from confusion about the term graphic when used in graphic novels. Third, there seems an area of stigma that claims comic texts themselves are too frivolous for any reader and shouldn't be read, period, let alone read as part of an educational curricula because of the low-brow label and lack of intellectual depth. If this concept were framed in the voices of my youth they would say that comic texts are trash that will rot your brain and make you lazy and stupid. These different labels, childish, lewd, and frivolous, are not always clear when speaking of stigma and often seem to miss their own disagreement of why they consider comic texts as inappropriate. In some respects, the genre of comic texts is perceived categorically as evil, and this perception contributes to the creation and perpetuation of stigma.

Botzakis's (2009) consideration, referenced earlier in this piece, has been quite important for its framing of the reasoning associated with the assumption that there is a lack of intellectual

depth in the comic texts. He shared,

> Contemporary writings about comic books often contain infantilizing words such as *Pow!*, *Bam!*, or *Zap!* in their titles … sound effects made popular in the 1960s Batman television program. Such depictions are emblematic of how comic books have been regarded in the United States for four decades. (Botzakis, 2009, p. 50).

While the questioning of intellectual depth may begin with some forms of cartoonish onomatopoeia, it may still go further into realms of intellect and thinking. Also, it's strange to me to see the infantilizing aspect of these words associated with Batman when I found him both questionable and scary. What we end up with is the perceived logic of a classic novel, *per se*, that is already part of the traditional classroom curricula, "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 10) battling the impassioned daydreaming of adventures, tights, and capes, "Meanwhile -- Far away at the north pole, an odd sky-ship slants downward toward Santa Claus' big toy factory!" (Siegel, 1940, p. 4).

Furthering this intellectual-versus-daydreaming framework is the notion that since the characters in comic texts often have unrealistic powers and expectations, the line of possible/impossible blurs for readers. Thus, the childish nature of the work, held as a societal stigma in itself, begins to impact the social identity of the readers as it adds to the stigma of the comic text itself. This is an important aspect too; if the comic texts are infantile, then those who read them *must* be infantile as well, eh? Of course, replacing infantile with non-intellectual, or lewd, or inappropriate then crafts other interesting points; however, I have no agreement with any of the logic that crafts those positions. Readers who enjoy comic texts seem to begin being seen as or feeling like some type of social outcast due to their activity with comics. My own

step-father would get angry with me when he saw me reading comics. Many of my teachers got angry with me as well. Lopes (2006) explained it in terms of stigma theory based on labeling theory: "Link and Phelan ... argue that labeling theory best conceptualizes this social process--especially since stigma theories and their effects can change over time. The basic effect of stigma is to discredit individuals, or at least subject them to being discredited" (p. 390). Since the artifact of comic texts is often stigmatized in attempts to discredit it, then it seems as if the readers of these comic texts, through the "social process" Lopes (2006) shared, begin to be discredited themselves. It may not be long until the reader who feels like an outcast then believes the social verdict and succumbs to the outcast's "social ill" label shared from Botzakis (2009) earlier in this chapter. However, I wonder about that because the safety I felt engaging with the comic text, spinning the red comic rack, seemed to shield me from self-stigmatization. While I was reading comic texts, I never labeled myself as the bad guy.

One comic text reader explains it as follows: "Most people, and when I say people I mean women, consider comic book readers dirty, overweight, acne ridden, and immature geek perverts" (A Fanboy on the iFanboy website as cited in Lopes, 2006). Now, I concede that some comic text readers may orient toward the medium because of the outcast nature itself. Instead of succumbing to the stigmatized label, they embrace it. That may offer a certain appeal for some readers and an outlet of belonging, a group or place to feel at home: "Goffman also pointed to how stigmatized individuals can reject the stigma theories of normals through contact with 'sympathetic others'" (Lopes, 2006, p. 390). Although the focus in this study is not in exploring the differentiation of the reader who finds comfort and acceptance in the outcast label and the ones who do not, it's interesting to consider this as a depth within any stigma itself. It's interesting to note that Goffman's stigma position was that stigma had no relation to what a

person, a comic text reader for our consideration, was capable of being. They may even end up being someone who masquerades as a Ph.D. by day, while slowly spinning a comic rack, looking for their next stigmatized reading material at night. Instead, it positioned stigma as a social construction (Lopes, 2006). This social construction could now include a stigmatizing of students, and in terms of teaching, the teachers who allow comic texts to sit on the shelves of their classroom libraries. In essence, the social construction of the comic text readers' social identity, or those of us who encourage comic texts as cogs in the negotiation between teaching and learning, is discredited due to the behavior of reading that particular genre of work. What this has likely done is imply that employing comic texts no longer simply rots our brain, it rots our pedagogy and as such, has labeled those of us using comic texts as the villains while heroes try to save students from our sinister comics. Botzakis (2009) further explained the discredited social identity accompaniment in another way: "When people think of comic-book readers, they typically get a vision of a stunted person who lives in his parents' basement and spends countless hours arguing the minutiae of his particular popular culture interests" (p. 50). Part of the explanation for Botzakis, it seems, is the infantilizing words—such as Batman's once common "*Pow!*" or "*Bam!*" visual sound effects touched upon earlier—associated with the genre. However, these aren't nearly as common today in comic texts as people seem to think, which points once again at a historical stigma that may not have the same footing in contemporary readings.

While Botzakis' (2009) presentation of the painting of the comic text reader as childish seems altogether different from Lopes's iFanboy (2006) painting as overweight, pervert framing, both show how the comic text reader is framed as the unaccepted social deviant, the perceived bad guy, albeit for radically different reasons. Are these people childish and immature, or are

they sexual perverts? According to Botzakis (2009), this stigmatized portrayal is representative of how the comic texts themselves have been looked upon in the United States for many decades, namely as the bad guys of literature. It may just be that portrayal that allowed many of my more reluctant students an in-route for making personal connections. After all, I didn't give up my love of comic texts, even under threat of being spanked with George in front of my class or threat of making my step-father explode with fury. I accepted their disappointment, but never their labeling of me.

Disagreement about the Cause of Stigma

While much of the stigma associated with comic texts claims the artifacts themselves are childish, not all scholars agree with the supposedly infantilizing nature of the comic text as a prime source of disapproval. Gallo and Weiner (2004) pointed to an opposite end of the spectrum in the history of one particular area of the comic text, the graphic novel: "There was a time when calling a novel graphic meant the book was either sexually explicit or filled with gore, or both" (p. 114). While considering this point of what has furthered the notion of stigma associated with the comic text form, it seems important to remember that these labels of stigma actually aren't in agreement with one another. For example, we see now that whether it was infantilizing *or* sexually explicit *or* frivolous the genre was still being stigmatized for its content; this seems to be a point of importance. Certain elements in society, such as disapproving superintendents, disapproving parents, or disapproving teachers, seem comfortable defining the entire spectrum of the comic text genre based on those few different areas: the infantilizing, childish portrayal (Botzakis, 2009), the perverted sexual deviant (Gallo & Weiner, 2004) or frivolous (Chute, 2008). Opportunity, it seems, crafted strange bedfellows. On the one side,

detractors pointing at the childish nature of work were somehow aligned with detractors from the other side, pointing at the perverted or obscene nature of the work. I had to laugh at the picture this crafted in the debate taking place in my mind. Standing across from my students and I would be a faceless challenger yelling, "Look at this! There are high school juniors and seniors reading cartoons! How inappropriate! Those are simplistic junk that will rot their brains!" Meanwhile, standing right next to that person, arms akimbo, would be another challenger agreeing in their own strange way, "Yes! And there is disgusting naked sex and gore!" while next to both challengers is another voice yelling, "And they are only intended for young children!" as if their arguments made them teammates who couldn't see that there wasn't any agreement in their agreement.

And we haven't even considered the stigma carried by the comic artists themselves; artists whom the Germans called an *Untermensch*, a subhuman (Lopes, 2006, p. 404). If what Lopes crafted from his use of Goffman's stigma work can be accepted as true of the comic text and comic text reader, it seems reasonable that it can be true of the comic text artist. Thus, the stigmatized content that Botzakis (2009), Gallo and Weiner (2004), and Lopes (2006) all seem to point toward casts an impression that all comic text work—the creators, the pieces themselves, the readers, all levels, all subgenres—is considered in the same light, even if for totally different (to the point of being obscenely opposite) reasons. This rather important point of fallaciousness that is apparent in the stigma argument is regarded by Bucher and Manning (2004), "Too often educators exclude graphic novels solely because of the format or the erroneous impression that all graphic novels focus on supernatural horror stories or are expressions of the male power fantasy..." (p. 68). The effect of this stigma on the genre and readers is then one of discrediting and forming a notion of inappropriate subhuman, to borrow from Lopes (2006) and a threat to

the "normal" social order. Dardess (1995) explained the threat to social order by arguing:

> Like other forms arising from the masses (whatever the exact nature of those masses--peasantry, folk, bourgeoisie, lower middle class, and including in the nineteenth century, children), the comic strip has been met with indifference and even at times with fear and hostility from higher, more educated groups. (p. 216)

This idea seems to create a divide between the "uneducated" readers of comic texts, Dardess's masses, and those people who consider themselves the more cultured members of society. On one side of the divide, there are the *Untermensch* comic readers being labeled as a lowered, subhuman status (Lopes, 2006) and on the other side there is the cultural elite and institutions that attempt to magically create cultural norms and appropriateness (media, laws, and schools for example) battling over what is and isn't frivolous for generations of students. As I think about this, I wonder what led my mother and a few of my teachers in the direction of supporting my reading of comic texts while my step-father and other teachers felt quite differently. Why did the stigmas seem only to effect some people and not others?

Dardess (1995) went on to consider the uphill climb that alternative art forms (of which comic texts may appropriately reside, but this is likely a point of debate) often have to undergo to gain acceptance and credibility. However, as Dardess (1995) pointed out, he feels comic text are not gaining in acceptance and credibility: "Yet while other [art] forms with lowly origins have been able to bridge the gulf between classes and to invigorate artistic expression on the highest levels, the comic strip has not been able to do so" (p. 216). Thus, we've reached another moment of earnest debate. While Dardess feels comic texts have been unable to bridge this gap, other voices, such as Berkowitz and Packer (2001) or Bucher and Manning (2004) from previously in this chapter, would disagree. However, if what Dardess presents is even remotely

considered for a moment, it stands to reason that fear and hostility may be why the genre has been unable to unshackle itself from the stigma of being the bad guy. For example, a fear of the gore or sex that some comic texts present accidentally falling into the hands of young students, or the hostility of simplistic, non-intellectual material frivolously "wasting" our students time in the classroom. One theory is that institutions with cultural authority, like schools and their various administrations for example, haven't all accepted the genre as legitimate, even though there is a wide range of quality in the comic texts, as Dardess (1995) considers.

While the cultural elite, whoever they may be, and the associated institutions that help to craft notions of appropriateness (earlier I said media, laws, and schools but should have probably added in religions, clubs, friends, and the like) that hold sway over what is or isn't acceptable, frivolous, childish, lewd and so on, may discriminate against the comic text genre, fueling the various facets of stigma (infantilizing, lewd, or frivolous), they seem to assume the stigma will stop readers from reading the comic text. It's as if they wish to revert the attention of students back to a more accepted, perhaps even standardized, style of materials: as if any sway these institutions have should be accepted without question because they *must* be the good guys. Once again, that act of questioning, like the Riddler, likely makes us seem like the bad guy to people holding their position so firmly. I imagine if this were a comic text, this is where Admiral Ackbar, from the Star Wars saga, would pop-up yelling, "It's a trap!" This trap can be conceptualized by Tabachnick (2007) who explained as follows:

> At the same time, however, reading practices are not just accepted indiscriminately from authoritative institutions. Individuals are capable of finding ways to navigate their worlds by using texts, objects, and situations to their advantage. Foucault ... acknowledged that institutions discipline individuals but that individuals could find spaces to gain their own

> advantages [learning from their activity], de Certeau … referred to such actions as tactics, and he detailed how reading is an activity that encourages people to "poach" ideas or beliefs from texts and use them to gain advantages [this may be easier if fanboys were battling super powered alien monsters, instead of a society convinced it is in the right]. Jenkins ... applied this concept of poaching in his study of media fans and found that texts are often used in ways that their producers do not intend. (p. 52)

While I don't fully interpret Foucault in precisely the same manner Tabachnick does, I understand and agree with the direction of his premise. Thus, while comic text readers may be able to look danger in the eye and leap tall buildings in a single bound, the best idea they may poach from the genre is that of the secret identity. That's a tip I learned all too well in the elementary classrooms of teachers who didn't support my reading of comic text. Instead of wearing the cape of reading comic texts proudly, it becomes something one does in hiding to avoid cultural judgment and punishment. It seems that cultural conveyance of the stigma, while aided in the framework of educational institution's historical disdain for the comic texts—if not simply the inability or unwillingness to allow them space in the classroom—began to grow in its own depiction of the comic industry as less than literature, as less than art, and less than educational.

However, I can say that for the young me, standing at the red comic rack, spinning it slowly, reading, thinking, imagining, engaging, these moments were very educational. In fact, the thoughts I wrestled with while holding comic in hand felt more complex than the thoughts I wrestled with sitting in a desk and staring at a chalkboard. Reading the comic texts, I found myself confronting the line between good and evil, one of the most classical of purposes for a humanist education in literature. At one point historically, the stigma itself was so strong that

due to governmental pressures, the comic text industry created a code of censorship to try to battle the stigma. Dardess (1995) explained, "[Comic text] remains marginalized in prestige and restricted to a largely juvenile audience. Efforts by comic strip artists to break out of these barriers have proved either traumatic or inconclusive. The publication of Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954 led to the institution of the Comics Code Authority and the freezing of what had promised to become an era of creative expression in comic art" (p. 216).

It has been argued that as educational critics continue to vilify the comic texts as a subliterate distraction that would be harmful to student imaginations—if not act as a hindrance to more traditional comprehension measures—they inadvertently vilify the readers (or perhaps teachers who promote the reading) of the genre as being irrational, unintelligent, immature, immoral, violent, and unsociable (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Lopes, 2006) instead of an audience being appreciative of an art form. As Meskin (2007) pointed out, this could stagnate the argument: "Establishing the existence of artistic pictorial narrative prior to the nineteenth century might seem to offer a way to establish the art status of comics, but comics have earned the right to be considered art on their own merits … We should get on with the business of thinking seriously about comics as art. Let's get beyond the definitional study" (p. 376). I concur with Meskin that the comic text form is art and that the debate of defining it as such should move on. As I reflect, it seems like I've felt like this as long as I can remember, even standing in the market reading comics as a child. At that time, I wouldn't have been able to word it as appropriately as Meskin (2007) does, but it seems like what I meant and felt when I'd battle the bad guys in my life, who wanted to take comics from me, when I would ask them why. What I ask, like Meskin, is that in this piece I'm allowed the smallest latitude to assume that while some historical pieces of comic text may have been infantilizing, or may have been frivolous, or may

have been filled with violence, sex, or gore, many comic texts and comic text readers are far removed from those things and shouldn't face such resistance and stigma. If I could travel back in time and watch myself reading comics, having adults in some position of power tell me I shouldn't be reading them, I can't imagine my older self offering any better advice or more poignant question than to keep asking them why.

Battling Stigma Past and Present

In the seminal graphic novel, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, McCloud (1993) gave a historical account of the comic texts and explores frameworks that paved the way for the medium. McCloud crafted a definition for comic art in general, including, but not limited to, our comic texts, over the course of many pages in his piece. The summation of his considerations presents the following definition of comic text, "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the reader" (McCloud, 1993, p. 20). While the definition may seem a bit wordy for some readers, it shares an overarching consideration under which comic texts can reside. Interestingly, McCloud (1993) pointed back in time to various methods, media, and features of communication that frame the beginning of the comic text style in his work. Based on McCloud's definition, and his various interpretations and inclusions of the art form, this would mean that comic texts, in one form or another have been around for more than 3,000 years. Humorously, that's about how old the red comic rack seemed as I stood in front of it as a child. As McCloud pointed out, items such as Egyptian tomb paintings, hieroglyphics, the Norman conquest pictorial record (the Bayeux tapestry), or even the pictorial manuscripts found by Cortez in the early 1500s have utilized sequenced pictorial art to convey messages effectively (and historically) as a visual

medium (1993). However, when analyzing McCloud's definition further, the scope of what falls under the umbrella of his definition, moving outside of our comic texts momentarily, adds a number of visual forms people may not consider as a sequential message: "From stained glass windows showing biblical scenes in order to Monet's series painting, to your own car owner's manual, comics turn up all over when sequential art is employed as a definition" (McCloud, 1993, p.20). One of the reasons it is important to consider McCloud's framework is that much of the literature surrounding comic texts today points to his definition of comic text as a foundational framework for the rest of the field. It is from this foundation that literature begins to glimpse the current evolution of the comic text medium and possible revision in the associated stigma. It's as if in crafting a definition that encompasses so many pieces of historical, religious, and cultural artifacts McCloud has shown the complexity of comic text and its heritage. Yes, there was some percentage of comic text that was filled with gore or sex. Yes, there is some percentage of comic text that is childish and likely another percentage that is frivolous. However, as McCloud has shown, there is so much more to comic text than just those few various points on the spectrum of comic text. It's as if the comic text genre, in its entirety, were being judged by a few pieces at the far ends of comic text work. Imagine, for a moment, judging all television programs—the entire gauntlet of all shows ever produced historically until this very moment today— as childish after only watching one episode of *Dora the Explorer* or as lewd after watching one adult film or frivolous after watching one episode of *Jersey Shore.* After watching only those three items, would we label *Downton Abbey* as childish, frivolous, and lewd without ever watching it? That is what seems to be happening to comic text and what seemingly strengthens Dardess's (1995) point that other art forms haven't had the same problem removing any shackles of stigma. Why are people opposed to comic texts seemingly oblivious to that

point? That question seems to echo throughout my life experiences with comic texts. Yet, I've too often been labeled the bad guy for asking it. Why is that?

It feels, too often, as if those who approach comic text with stigma do so with a simplified perspective of what comic texts are and create the childish, frivolous, and lewd considerations I'm wrestling with here. A good counter to the simplified approach is gained when Tabachnick (2004) explained:

> The graphic novel gives us the subtlety and intimacy we get from good literary books while providing the speed of apprehension and the excitingly scrambled, hybrid reading experience we get from watching, say, computer screens that are full of visuals as well as text. (p.25)

The point Tabachnick made here tries to show that as society has become more familiar, or perhaps more comfortable, with communicating through a blending of visuals and traditional text via their cellphones, TiVo's, GPS devices, and so on, the comic medium probably becomes more understood in style (blending of word-based text and visual as text) and perhaps more readily accepted. However, I would caution any idea that this theory of possible acceptance would mean any increase in comic text literacy since the comic texts themselves, as Wolk (2007) pointed out, are a style of combined word and visual that create a new text and imply a new literacy itself.

When considering the possible revision of culturally associated stigma in comic texts, there seems to be a growth in the acceptance and use of comic texts today, *even* in education. Carter (2007) explained, "There are many high-quality graphic novels that focus on important issues relevant to teens, and teachers need to be aware of them" (p. 49). Carter's point here supports the idea that there is more to comic text than the childish, frivolous, or sexually explicit and as such, there should be room for comic texts in the classroom. Chun (2009) also makes this

point: "I advocate the use of graphic novels to aid language pedagogy and learning as one way of implementing a multiliteracies approach that deepens reading engagement" (p. 144). The list of scholars who make a case for comic text in the classroom is growing (see, e.g., Schwartz, 2002; Versaci, 2001; Wolk, 2007). However, the exact cause of this growth is uncertain and has room for inquiry.

Comic text use and an increase in the use thereof in the classroom might be gaining pedagogical traction because, notwithstanding stigma, scholars like McVicker (2007) contend the following: "Comic images enhance and extend the text communication. They attract the attention of the reader and create understanding of unknown factors in the text's language. It is clear that visual literacy skills assist literacy development, maintenance, and comprehension of text" (p. 85). Thus, what McVicker considers is the utilization of visual literacy skills—skills that seem quite important in the growing *visual* society of the 21st century—and have long been important to readers of comic texts. This idea is echoed by Bucher and Manning (2004) when they proposed the following: "This correlation of words and illustrations is crucial because the art as well as the text must be 'read'" (p. 68). However, I'm not sure reading comic texts is the same as being visually literate. I realize some scholars, like McVicker and Bucher and Manning, take a position that connects the ability to effectively read a comic text to visual literacy. In this way, it's as if the point is being made that reading a comic text is the same as reading any other visual, a piece of art, a photograph, a television show, an advertisement. I don't fully agree with this point although I understand and respect their proposition. I'm not trying to say scholars making that point are the bad guys and I'm the good guy. I do, however, find myself much closer to Wolk's (2007) position stated previously that comic texts themselves are a combination of word-based-text and visual-text that are integrated in such a cohesive manner that it creates

something more than pictures helping words or words helping pictures. It's as if comic text are their own genre that require their own style, skills, and literacy to effectively navigate. However, it is that ability to synthesize word and art in comic text that many of the same scholars considered previously, highlight as an important focus of the classroom.

Using a Humanities-Oriented Action Research Approach

I've chosen to use an action research framework for this dissertation. While this framework may be well known to some, others may be unfamiliar and left wondering why it has become the selected framework for my chosen direction in the following chapters. Thus, I'd like to explain two areas: 1) What I understand action research to be and wherein its value is to the academia in research, and 2) Why action research seems the best fit for this study.

While there are many accessible and appropriate definitions and explanations of action research, I've chosen to use the explanation of Reason and Bradbury (2001):

> [Action research is] a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p. 1)

The key elements of the Reason and Bradbury definition that stood out to me and helped me to decide on this framework are the "and" links between words of impact in my own teaching and learning experiences, as well as the involvement beyond the researcher: "action and reflection," "theory and practice," "in participation with others" (p. 1). These all speak to me of praxis.

Thus, instead of speaking only of my childhood experiences with what I interpreted as stigmatization, I'd like to know what others say, do, and feel in relation to working with comic texts and how that may impact my teaching. I think there needs to be something considered about the experience of readers, and in this case, students, with the piece they are reading and what that might imply for educators. In this, I suppose I'm feeling what Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) felt when they explained, "... [They] have not done justice to the diversity of experience and the depth of insight reflected in the comments submitted…" (p. 10) for their own explanation and exploration of action research. To use their statement that is directed toward action research itself and apply it to my rationale for choosing action research as the framework for this comic text stigma oriented study, I see myself desiring the diversity of experience of the students with whom I work while engaging (or not) with comic text and seeing what we may possibly learn from their insight and reflection. Can you imagine what the young me, standing in the market with comic in hand, pouring furiously over page-after-page would have said to a researcher if queried about my reading habits? If asked, "Why do you read comic books?" I wonder what I would have replied. Just as importantly, I wonder why so many of the adults in my young life, those I wrestle with labeling the bad guys even though they see themselves as the good guys, didn't bother asking those questions. Those questions we leave unasked can be powerful heroes or soul-crushing villains that haunt us throughout time.

Another reason I have chosen action research as the framework for this study is the echo there seems to be between action research and the work of John Dewey (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). Dewey once explained a connection between social life, experience, and communication in a manner that feels supportive of what I see as action research, although he was speaking more pointedly about education:

> Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience....The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. The formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning. Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art. It may be fairly said, therefore, that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power. (Dewey, Boydston, Baysinger, & Levine, 1985, pp. 8-9)

What I see as so very valuable about action research is that there seems to be not "one mold" that creates the "routine way" of research Dewey warns of here. Instead, the framework helps to craft the action, reflection, theory, practice, and participation with others pointed out previously (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). As such, I've chosen this theory because it aligns strongly with my beliefs of what good teaching is about.

On a more personal note, I've often struggled with the notion that some research studies or researchers promote their work as unbiased or value free. I realize it's a standard many of our colleagues strive for, but I feel it's still a matter for debate. On this, I've struggled to understand the disconnect between a topic we've chosen to research, invested time, interest, and often learning, to only say our values weren't a part of the study. Now, before I'm castigated too harshly for this point, I don't mean to say these studies or researchers are in any way wrong or

misinformed. I simply feel that the academic distance claimed in certain value-free artifacts seems limiting. Why would we *always* want to limit the experience gained from, or during, our research to those from only one approach or perspective? I appreciate the explanation shared by Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire (2003) in better framing this point:

> Action research challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge which holds that in order to be credible, research must remain objective and value-free. Instead, we embrace the notion of knowledge as socially constructed and, recognizing that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction, we commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices. (p. 11)

It seems that for there to be a consideration of stigma, there would need to be a set of values that differentiates those doing the stigmatizing and those being stigmatized while giving voice to the wide-spectrum of stigma readers may feel. Without wanting to oversimplify this, I have chosen this model of action research so that we aren't left asking comic text readers to rate the strength of their stigma on a Likert scale or how often it occurs. As such, I'm much more interested in how and why people respond, feel, and think about themselves in relation to this research than organizing their responses from a more demographically framed and emotionally distanced place.

While I understand that there are various research approaches that are explicitly value laden, I choose to use action research for this study because when considering the complexity of stigmatization in its various forms, I wanted to be able to better understand what students share and to consider why they shared it, then consider how that could have effect on my teaching. In its most basic essence, I felt action research worked best for this study because the study was

socially engaged, was likely educative for both the participants and me, and possibly ended with complex personal reflection and insight that differs from each participant to participant as well as myself as an educator. All of those aspects, however, were simultaneously beneficial for my teaching, as well as possibly for teaching in general, for students and for the research-oriented threads of discussion. The action research framework allowed me to learn more about my teaching as well as consider more fully how to reflect and adjust my teaching on the premise of my research experience.

Are There Limits?

I felt it an important goal to make sure not to create suspicion of stigma where there was none or where the stigma consideration is based on a memory from decades past. If the stigma considered in contemporary comic text discussion is true (Botzakis, 2009; Bucher & Manning, 2004; Gallo & Weiner, 2004; Lopes, 2006), it seems like the number of students interested in exploring some version of a comic text might be low. If the genre truly is stigmatized, and I say that because I don't rightly know whether it is or isn't stigmatized any longer by contemporary participants, wouldn't people (the students in this case) have an aversion to reading comic texts? I mean, I read comic texts as a child even though I believe they were stigmatized. I read them even now without much thought toward the possible stigmatizing impact. If society really does see comic text readers as the acne-ridden, socially inept perverts characterized by some discussions (Lopes, 2006; Tabachnick, 2007), wouldn't people be dissuaded from reading them, especially once we consider that this "exploring" of the activity in this study is taking place in a public context like the classroom? Students are asked to do this in an environment (the social classroom) that may produce a gamut of social and cultural pressures with varying degrees and

levels of comfort or discomfort.

Another possible limitation may be my wanting to do humanities-oriented research when surrounded by the social-science standards and expectations of academia. To be blunt, this has often felt quite daunting to me. I've had a number of colleagues claim that what humanities oriented researchers do isn't *really* research. The personal narrative and approach of one style might not fit the expectations of those who have chosen another style. I can't help but wonder in disappointment why they limit research in that way. I am quite prepared to be told that action research is more editorializing than serious academic research. I politely disagree. I admit there is sloppy, editorializing action research. However, there is poorly done research of all kinds. What I hoped for was the consideration that there is also careful, reflective, thoughtful action research that could be done well, just like all styles and types of research could be done well. There are good guys and bad guys of all styles, so let's not race to judgement. It's as if we have sometimes forgotten that the quality of the research is just that, the quality of the research, separate from the type of research. When I ask some colleagues about their experiences with stigma, they respond with questions about statistics or demographics. For quite some time, I've tried to find acceptance in a research world that too often shrugs off much of humanities-oriented research as flawed or lacking vigor, implying it isn't academic if it's personal or emotional or not easily measured. Too often, I get labeled the bad guy again when I ask why. However, the point of this research is still focused on being mutually beneficial for considerations of research and for reflective teaching. It's as if we've fallen victim to a tendency to only value social science—not just value, because there is value, but *only value*—frameworks in academic research, which may work against the nature of this action research piece. However, my desire to synthesize how students feel and respond, regarding comic texts, with how other comic text readers, including

myself, have felt, seems to me to work best in a humanities-oriented model.

I think this type of humanities-oriented inquiry, like many qualitative approaches to research that focuses on readers as readers, is the type of research that needs to be considered when dealing with this particular question of stigma. Some people may disagree with this consideration, and it is quite important for our academic debate that they do so. It won't make either of us the good guy or the bad guy. I accept it and find no disrespect in collegial debate. They may feel that if something can't be carefully measured, categorically organized, or precisely quantified in frameworks they appreciate it isn't academic or worthy of discussing, let alone sharing. They may not consider the loss of how students and researchers feel, think, or respond—nor any explanation of a personal, contextually complex "Why?"—as a detriment to the work. My hope is that this piece will stand on its own merit and perhaps help readers consider the point that not all research has to fit within traditional social-science frameworks. Just like with comic texts, not all research is infantilizing, lewd, or frivolous. We should have every right to value our own focus, such as the humanities oriented focus instead of the social science oriented focus, in whatever manner(s) can best further our learning and debate as long as the process is viable and safe to the participants. This argument is quite similar to argument I make regarding comic texts. We needn't judge an entire genre as unworthy simply because we don't acclimate toward it, and it is worth asking the question about the line between good and evil. As a researcher, I realize that in wanting something different from the majority, I am likely positioning this piece in the academic minority. Humanities-oriented research does not enjoy the high status of scientific research. It's nearly like this dissertation itself may experience a stigmatizing, just like the comic texts it considers, because of the choices made within. However, I accept that because I want to be able to not only ask why our human nature, our

context, even our level of caring might have a larger impact on our research, responses, and revelations, but to also share the framing of my experiences. Science cannot address questions of good and evil; that's what the humanities are for, and that is what literature is for. It is the individual human nature of my students that creates the real story behind the responses to interactions of stigma. This is not only what I hope to explore but also what I see as the potential limitation to and assumption about the research.

Outcomes and Importance

At one point in my thoughts, my own position on comic text stigma was moving to a place wherein I wondered whether stigma were only alive because those of us who may have felt stigma during our youth continued to consider it alive and well. I wondered whether through the discussion of stigma we were keeping a memory alive, a shell of a former stigma per se, but ignoring a contemporary absence of stigma, especially since there is a growing amount of discourse in academia on the use of comic texts as a visual literacy mechanism to help students gain from and relate to experiences of the comic text characters. These experiences, often different from one reader to another, show that with different readers, thinkers, writers, or fans, we deal with a multitude of events that frame the background of the reader and comic text interaction. Thus, some educators are promoting a multiliteracy approach for today's needs that begins to weaken the consideration of comic text related stigma (Bucher & Manning, 2004; Carter, 2007; Chun, 2009; Tabachnick, 2007). Moreover, this research might end up showing that people who don't identify themselves as comic text readers due to a lack of experience with the texts may have never produced their own stigma against the text (or readers of the texts) or reproduced the historical stigma the text and readers have experienced in the past.

Another avenue of warrant came in the vein of teaching and learning. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 offer an opportunity, due to the action research framework, to consider how different teaching approaches, when combined with comic text artifacts, might play a role in helping students achieve growth in their learning through providing more tools, more options, more tastes, and other such considerations. In the end, reflecting upon the classroom environments where these comic texts were used and studied can likely teach educators something about teaching, something about learning, and something about research.

CHAPTER 2: Comic Texts from a Classroom Perspective

I shared briefly in the last chapter a few rather quick details about a book-banning event I experienced with my classroom library during my time as a high school educator. This event was both complex and frustrating to me as a language arts teacher. When considering what transpired, I often end up battling disappointment and frustration. This has much to do with the emotional scar the event has left with me and some to do with the experiences of my childhood being judged by the opponents of comic texts as I read them and then labeled as the deviant for reading outside of the accepted framework the "good guys" had created. I don't simply remember administrators and books; I remember the stories and faces of many of my students involved. For me, whenever I read or discuss book banning, my mind happens to go to one student in particular. For the purposes of this chapter, I'll refer to the student as John and share a memory that frames most discussions of book banning for me.

The memory, while a few years removed, still plays in high definition in my mind. I remember quite clearly the way John looked at me. For the first time in any of our classes together, I saw just a flicker of what I thought was vulnerability on his face. John asked whether I read, "This stuff," as he showed me a copy of the *Watchmen* (1987) comic text he had borrowed from my shelves. My mind raced; I wondered what John would say. This was the first time in any of the classes he'd taken with me that he approached and engaged me in a conversation. I responded that I did in fact read, "That stuff," and that the *Watchmen* was one of my favorite pieces of work. I wondered if John was a comic reader or if he was plotting some joke at my expense. I remember John acting a bit apprehensive also, "Yeah… really?" so I started to talk a bit about the comic text to show him that I was being honest with him but I secretly wondered about his motives. This is part of the life of a person who has been labeled for

reading comic texts. I shared small parts about my favorite plot twists, character developments, and artistic moves and his apprehension seemed to slowly lessen, which helped my apprehension lessen as well. This wasn't a quick conversation, but it felt rather fast as it moved along. It seemed like we were trying to dance around the issue as we were considered each other as one of the good guys or one of the bad guys. Both of us wondering who the other would turn out to be.

John struggled through both of the English classes he had taken with me and had failed multiple English classes during his time in school. If I asked him why he felt he was struggling in our class, he would shrugged off the problem as a simple dislike of reading. I couldn't guess at the number of times he told me, "This [reading] ain't my thing." However, after listening to John talk about some of the complex minutiae associated with the *Watchmen,* I realized that John was actually one heck of a reader and it very much was his thing. He seemed to comprehend the twists and turns of the piece quite well. The *Watchmen* isn't a simple test to engage with at any level. It is a very complex, thought provoking piece. For the first time, I started to wonder whether John simply hadn't found any reading in our classes together that mattered to him. Looking back, I realize now that he, like many other students, needed to feel some buy-in for the text to matter enough to engage with it. It was a stroke of luck that one of my favorite comic texts was also one of his and that we both took a risk that maybe the other one wouldn't turn out to be a bad guy. This gave me the chance to hear him talk about something he liked to read. At one point, John summarized his thoughts rather simply by sharing, "This was, like, the coolest story I've ever read." At that moment, John and I were able to talk about the *Watchmen* as two people who loved the piece and the comic text genre. We were able to talk about the piece without worry of quizzes, essays, notes, multiple-choice questions or any of the other wrappings that sometimes suffocate readings in a classroom, but we still had to feel each other out a bit

before we let our guard down and shared our secret identities as comic readers. We were two people who enjoyed comics talking about a great story. Still, as a teacher I was able to see something about John's ability to comprehend, synthesize, and make meaning that I hadn't been allowed to with a majority of our other class work. This was a learning moment for me as a classroom educator and John, clutching a comic text in his hands, was acting as my teacher. This was only the first discussion John and I had on comic texts. Over the following years, and past his graduation, we'd have many others. This discussion about the *Watchmen*, however, was the first, and it's the one I seem to come back to when I consider book-banning events.

This memory of John and the *Watchmen* comic text was the first thing that snapped into my mind when the principal of the high school where I taught told me that I had to lock my classroom cupboards and stop allowing students to borrow books from my classroom library, at least until the investigation was completed. I was feeling some confusion and wondered: *investigation*? What was he talking about? I hadn't heard of an investigation. Should I know about this? I asked for clarification but struggled to grasp his explanation. I asked him, "Why?" and wasn't grasping the sounds he was forming for an answer. It felt very much like I was being told by my step-father I shouldn't be reading so much and definitely shouldn't be reading that comic trash. My heart was pounding and my ears were buzzing as I caught small pieces of his story. In hindsight, I can explain the situation better now that some time has passed then I could have that day standing in my classroom with my mind racing and head spinning. Originally, I didn't quite follow the story arc through the noise in my head, but with time the picture has become less hazy.

Apparently a secretary of some sort in the administrative offices was processing a book inventory receipt I submitted a few months prior. She came across a receipt for the purchase of a

few hundred books that linked to a grant I had written aimed at expanding my classroom library. I had received a number of grants in my time at the high school and had agreements in place with a local bookstore that would give me discounts, match our spending, or give my students small discounts on books if they let the owner know they were a student of mine looking for good books to read. My students could stop into the bookstore or my classroom and add titles to our "Wish List" and then every so often, a shipment of books would be delivered to our classroom. This happened a handful of times over various trimesters. In my mind, this was firmly in the realm of the good guys. This last time, however, a secretary I had never met, and even now don't know her name, became concerned. As she scanned the receipt, categorizing a delivered shipment for payment, she became worried about the titles of some of the books on the list. This, followed by a series of varied steps, led to my classroom library being placed on some type of administrative lockdown pending an investigation on appropriate use. My classroom library—that filled every cupboard, shelf, corner, and closet in my classroom—built from a few years of student input, was a source of joy for students and for myself, not something that was a cause of concern, or so I thought. Yet, now it was on lockdown and I couldn't allow students to borrow my books. I'm not sure I can find the right words to explain what it felt like. Nonetheless, I was labeled the bad guy again and some good guy needed to save students from reading that would rot their brains, make them lazy, and have a deleterious effect on their moral development.

At some point in my life, I had formed the belief that a good way to find out what students think they should be reading is to ask them what they were actually reading and what they thought was important for other people to read. This probably has everything to do with how my own reading habits were treated as a child. Thus, I set out to build my own classroom

library, when first hired as a teacher, in a manner in which a childhood me would have found safety in their reading choices. I had created a system for deciding appropriateness for my classroom library that was rather flexible. After asking students what they were reading and what they thought other students should be reading, I'd try to get those titles and add them to my own selections for our classroom library. This is rather common in comic realms. While standing at the comic rack, you ask another comic reader what comics they're enjoying or avoiding and share your own selections to read or avoid as well.

If there was questionable content involved with a book students thought should be part of the classroom library, and this did come up rather often, I'd either read it or discuss it with students who had previously read it or who suggested the book, to better understand how the content was handled. If a book dealt with suicide, rape, violence, or other questionable content, the student(s) would be tasked with writing up a short explanation of why the reality of those messages mattered—why those controversial topics deserved to be in our classroom library—and then find a link in a classical canon text in efforts to show texts that were already approved with the same topicality (e.g., suicide in a contemporary novel would link to the suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*). This encouraged, and perhaps coached, students who may cringe at the classical canon of texts that permeates their curriculum to become agents of change, but only if they *chose* to do so. It was intended to show students that they could be revolutionaries if the issue mattered to them. Sometimes the process would happen in just a bit different order. If a classical text was too outdated or poorly suited for students' taste and led to them complaining about having to read it, I would ask them to find an option better suited to their own tastes to give us something for comparison. Then, they'd be tasked with debating the merits and message of their choice over the choice of the classical canon and current curriculum. Many of my

colleagues and many of the parents of my students were savvy enough to recognize this not only got students to read the curriculum's text, but then debate it with more contemporary texts through acts of comparison and contrast or synthesis. It was a rather sneaky point that it took more work to fight for change than to simply give up. We read more, debated more, argued tastes and styles, and either built or burned bridges without burning books. In my mind, we were firmly entrenched as the heroes battling those villains who wanted to numb our minds and steal our enjoyment of reading.

However, as my cupboards were locked that one afternoon, with the principal explaining it was the superintendent's decision, none of that teaching and learning stuff, none of that developing student autonomy, voice, or choice "stuff" seemed to matter. All that mattered that day was that someone didn't like the titles of some books on my shelves. To put it gently, I was immeasurably disappointed in the bureaucracy of our school district. Students were choosing to read—what was wrong about that? And why was I the bad guy once again for having these questions? On what basis were comic texts being judged as villainous? Now, years later and with various grizzled wars like this having taken their toll, I realize my original stance may have been one of naiveté. However, I'm still quite proud of having felt it and stood by it through the battle that developed. Yet, I'm sure in the memory of the superintendent and probably the secretary that started the butterfly effect leading to this dissertation, I'm still painted as the bad guy who subverted education and harmed students by listening to their opinions on reading.

As I shared previously, it seems the secretary recording the paperwork and receipt from my grant was skimming the titles on a delivery list and was shocked by a few titles she stumbled upon. For example, Inga Muscio's gender reclamation piece, *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence,* was rumored to have caught her eye and offended her, along with a handful of

other titles. She spoke with the superintendent about the list and shared her disapproval of a number of titles. The superintendent called the principal and called for all the books to be locked up until this matter was fully investigated. Questions were asked of me: Why would you have such vulgar books on your shelves? Why would you let students read these books? What were you thinking? Were you even thinking? My answers attempted to explain, teach, and share the wonderful atmosphere that was being created. It was an atmosphere aimed at making autonomous, life-long readers. However, my responses were swatted away and repeatedly ignored. Thus, I found a moment to ask a few questions of my own, even though asking the questions seemed to push me further into the role of the bad guy: "Riddle me this!" Did you read the books? Did any of you read the books? And the answer, repeatedly, was no. Do you know what the books are about? No. No was the answer from the secretary, the superintendent, and from the various administrators involved. No. No. No. No. It seems no one who took offense to the titles on the grant invoice had actually read any of the books they deemed inappropriate or bothered to investigate the topics or messages shared within the pages. I shared that the word cunt is offensive and all too often used to demean women and the message of the book with the same title, *Cunt*, fights to remove the power of the word as an expletive for readers. The book attempts to reverse the trends of degradation toward women and offers a reclamation of power. It wasn't promoting violence toward women or disempowering them; it was an attempt at the exact opposite. I was emphatic. To me, this was being the good guy. Yet, the secretary, superintendent, and others involved were offended by the title structure so the book had to go and there must be something wrong with me if I disagreed. At this point, some readers may be thinking of the book content and title and asking the same questions the administration asked about the appropriateness with high school students. And that's a fair position to hold out

of context and something I'll address as we move forward if allowed the smallest amount of latitude.

There were a few books that dealt with teen depression and suicide that had some versions of *Loving Yourself* or *Self Love* in the title and a comment was made that masturbation books were not appropriate. *Masturbation?* I honestly felt like I was in *The Twilight Zone*. I was having trouble wrapping my head around the concept that they wanted to ban books they hadn't read, hadn't really even considered beyond the cover and titles. At the time, I wondered how they could take such actions and not see themselves as the villains. Now, I realize how complex my thoughts were as a child about the lines between good guys and bad guys being murky because it had sprung up yet again. Even though I explained those particular books were about self-esteem, not self-pleasure, my comments were ignored. These specific books were often written by psychologists whose work aimed at helping struggling teens, but that fact didn't seem to hold much sway in the matter. As the administrative group slowly picked their way through the various invoices that collected many of the titles in my classroom library, they stumbled on a number of comic books and graphic novels that had been purchased. The Superintendent actually asked aloud: "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" It felt like watching my mother and step-father argue about my reading comics, except this time the administration was playing the role of my step-father (the bad guys) and I was playing the role of my mother (the good guys). Yet, as often seems to happen in these murky situations, the administration saw themselves as in the right (the good guys) and saw me in the wrong (the bad guys). This didn't seem the best opportunity to point out the differences between comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, so I refrained from that particular teaching opportunity. Yet, at some point, as I weathered the onslaught of complaints and

accusations, I realized that there seemed an inexhaustible divide between what my students actually read in their daily lives and what the administrative group seemed to feel *children* should read (even though they were high school students nearing graduation), at least based on titles and genre level stereotypes.

Without fully unpacking the drama of the ensuing weeks, I'll say this: the outpouring of support from students and their parents was inspiring. Parents called the school, emailed me, stopped by during my prep hour, and offered kind words, handshakes and hugs, and kept donating to the classroom library even though the shelves and cupboards were locked. My students asked, nearly daily, for my permission to revolt. I wonder now how many great revolts started with permission. Back then, my answer—framed with a smile—was to ask them to keep reading on their own and let me wrestle with this issue. The questions they would ask were usually innocent and harmless but were filled with passion: Do you think we'll win? Will they take our books? Why are they picking on us? What can we do? These echoed in my mind. I had asked so many of these questions myself as a young reader who felt too often attached because of what I read. My answers were also innocent and harmless, at least in form: Yes, I hope we'll win. I think we've already won because people (the community) were talking about the books we (the students/class) think they should read. No, I don't think they'll take our books. They only need to read them and think about the messages being considered. They aren't picking on us; they're trying to protect you, just maybe in a strange way. This was, once again, a murky issue. We can keep reading, keep talking, keep trying and nothing will stop that right now. Without belaboring all of the specific details, I'll move forward to the end of the incident, almost a month later. I had to justify my choices for having the books in my classroom even though they weren't required reading. I also had to explain how I had previously shared my

classroom library policies with the parents of my students. *Did the parents of your students know you had these books on your shelves and lent them to students?* I gave the administration the information sheet I sent home for parents. The sheet shared my school contact info, prep hours, a link to the American Library Association's (ALA) website, a sampling of nearly 100 book titles in the library, and this message:

> *Please communicate with me if there is a title, topic, author, or genre you would like your child to abstain from reading. You are welcome into my classroom to peruse the classroom library at your convenience. In the event your son or daughter comes home with a book that you do not approve of, please retrieve the book from them, contact me, and I will make arrangements to collect the book from you.*

I had never had a parent contact me asking for items to be removed or withheld. In fact, the only parental involvement I encountered was in the form of parents donating books for the classroom library.

The *100 Most Commonly Banned and Challenged Books* on the American Library Association's website was a place where many of the more risqué pieces in the classroom library came from. It had, over time, became something like my new version of the red metal comic rack from my youth and offered a collection of things to puzzle over for me and my students. However, while some of those titles were a part of the classroom library inventory, most of them were overlooked during the banning event, being neither challenged nor removed in the end. I found a subtle irony in that specific detail. The pieces that were commonly banned or challenged didn't set alarms to the administration when they became involved in scrutinizing the classroom library contents. In fact, they were overlooked while a number of other books were challenged based on only their title, like *Cunt*, or a genre, like graphic novels. It doesn't seem too far

stretched to point out that a possible reason that none of ALA's commonly challenged books raised an alarm to these administrative versions of Bradbury's *Firemen* is that they weren't looked at closely because the titles and genre seemed safe. In the end, only a few books (of the thousand or so) were kept from the shelves. However, all of the comic texts (as explained in the last chapter, which includes comic strips, comic books, comic trade paperbacks, and graphic novels) were removed from the classroom library, being deemed inappropriate based on their genre. It felt like the red comic rack from my past was being locked away, in some solitary prison cell somewhere, and the bad guys were going to win. But the bad guys were cast as the good guys who were protecting children from the evils of comic texts. When I asked whether any of the decision makers involved read comic texts, my question was cast off as irrelevant with a chuckle and left unanswered. However, that in itself spoke quite loudly.

I realize I've left a bit of a cliffhanger here as readers may be asking which books were banned from the shelves. I left that specific detail out on purpose, a bit like a secret identity. Any reader may see a certain title and feel one way or another about it in particular. That would miss the intended mark. Instead, I'd like readers to consider a broader scope of the event: someone offended by book titles, or by a book style (comic text), wanted the books banned for all students. Please realize that I knew the collection had material in it that was not intended for *Dora the Explorer* readers. I asked high school students, overwhelmingly juniors and seniors, what they thought we should be reading and I listened to them, instead of judging them or censoring them. I was tasked with teaching reading strategies to juniors and seniors in high school, to both struggling and college prep readers. I needed materials that would encourage and engage their reading habits on my shelves. Books like *The Kite Runner*, which shares a scene wherein a 12 year old boy rapes a 10 year old boy, were in the library because of their complex

messages and ability to connect with a high school audience, as I was told by that same high school audience. Somewhat ironically, *The Kite Runner* was completely ignored and never caused an eyebrow to be raised, theoretically because the title didn't seem blasphemous and the cover of the book showed that it had won various awards. And I still come back to the point that the books weren't *required* reading. I feel like that should have mattered. Wasn't I the good guy here? Why attack my classroom library? The books were only there for enjoyment reading and intellectual discussion. Ironically, the very few books that were pulled from the shelves weren't as scandalous as many of the books that were allowed to remain. To give a brief taste of the irony, *The Essential Feminist Reader*, which had been donated by a parent, was pulled. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, a gift from a student, was ignored and allowed to stay. *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* was pulled. *Kite Runner* was allowed to stay. There seemed no rhyme or reason other than this: if the title seemed too edgy, radical, or offensive the book was pulled. If the genre was one that was often stigmatized (comic texts), they were pulled. However, if the title seemed safe and auspicious (e.g., *Stone Butch Blues*) the book was allowed to stay.

However, and I begin to shift focus here more fully, all of the comic texts in the collection were pulled from my shelves and deemed unsuitable due to the administration's general judgment about the genre as bad for children. The titles didn't matter when the entire genre was itself considered inappropriate. It was like being stared at by my step-father and told that reading comic texts would rot my brain because they were trash. It sent a clear message that the comic texts themselves—in their entirety—were seen as inappropriate for a high school classroom. This seemed clearly a moment of stigma. If this dissertation were talking about cultures, about people, about race or sexuality, and an entire section of people were removed for being the "bad type" of people, we'd understand the injustice more clearly and rally. Instead, my

colleagues at that time commented by saying things like, “Well, they’re only comic books.” When had the world gone mad and turned everyone into villains? Those people hadn’t had the moments I had with students like John. Remember John, the student from my memory who had failed English twice already? John seemed the poster child for students who had been traditionally labeled as struggling readers (at best) or lazy, unguided, a waste of time (at worst). Yet, there he was, sharing with me his interest and ability to read, debate, consider, analyze, etc. complex thematic elements with deep philosophical undertones when it was something he invested his time into reading.

Before an unwarranted assumption is made, I am not implying comic texts are good for “struggling” readers or that John was a struggling reader. I do not put much value into that very limiting assumption and label. Traditionally labeled strong readers, by the standards of classical canon texts, often connect with comic texts too. That point—that readers, regardless of label (experienced v. inexperienced, strong v. weak, good v. bad, etc.) would engage with comic text if it were something that interested them—should also have meant something. Yet with the *investigation* complete, I was asked to keep comic texts off my shelves as they were labeled inappropriate and could give the wrong impression, whatever that may be, to students. Apparently, the heroes had saved the day.

As I rekindle the memory of these events in writing here, I feel much the same now as I did then; I'm disappointed. I’m worried that I rolled over, as a not-yet-tenured teacher, and removed the pieces that I was asked to remove from my collection without enough fight. I felt pressured and relied, perhaps a bit too much, on justice and common sense to win the day. There had to be superheroes somewhere that would rescue us from this attack, right? If there were, they never came. Perhaps instead of being faster than a speeding bullet, they needed to be

stronger than a Superintendent's stigma. My disappointment still feels fresh. Actually, disappointed may not be the right word. I'm still hurt. A colleague once said that my work sounds like it's coming from a place of hurt and as I weigh his response, I realize that he is very much right. I am hurt. And I'm biased, and angry, and ashamed, and jaded, and… disillusioned... of the administration's actions and decisions. I'm angry at my step-father, many of my teachers, an avalanche of colleagues, and everyone who played the role of villain and tried to stop engaged reading from happening. As a child standing in the market, I was reading. As a teacher, standing in the classroom, my students were reading, borrowing books, donating books, getting their parents engaged in what we were doing, and were talking about complex thoughts created from engaging with these books. Remember that these were books the students had a say in placing on the classroom shelves. Reading wasn't being done for a quiz. There wasn't a grade looming overhead like a carrot on a stick beckoning students forward. Reading was happening for the sake of reading, and I felt like we were doing good things in the classroom. How could we be perceived as the bad guys? Even now it's still murky for me. The positive feelings associated with the classroom library was stopped by the book banning event and something that I had felt passionately about for much of my life, reading comic texts, was once again tossed aside as educationally inappropriate. And I can't help but think of the dichotomy between John, approaching me of his own accord, holding the *Watchmen* in his hands and sharing, "This was, like, the coolest story I've ever read," and the superintendent asking, "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?"

Where Are Comic Texts Being Used in Education?

While Chapter 1 of this dissertation discussed stigma in comic texts and the beginning of

this chapter showed, if allowed some leeway, that there are areas of education that may be holding a stigma toward comic texts, it shouldn't be forgotten that many educators are currently using comic texts effectively in the classroom. The uses vary by course, educator, and student, but the use is there. It is in some ways like my childhood with parents who held different views. My mother (and a few of my elementary teachers) supported my reading of comic texts, while my step-father (and a few of my other elementary teachers) didn't. In the coming chapters of this dissertation, I explore the use of comic texts in my own classrooms to search for any indicators of stigmas that may come from students who are asked to engage with comic texts. However, before I make that step, I think it would be appropriate to share some of the discussion occurring about the effective use of comic texts to give another side to the issue and to answer the superintendent's question presented earlier, "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?"

One area in which comic texts seem to blend effectively into the curriculum is art. Berkowitz and Packer (2001) shared experiences with students and comic text in art classrooms. They shared that: "As an art teacher, Berkowitz has noticed how many students interested in comic books and cartoons did not perform well in art class. Students who could not stay focused in … class would spend hours drawing comic book characters" (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001, p. 12). If what Berkowitz and Packer implied here speaks of interest and engagement, it provides an opportunity to blend the artistic styles holding the interests of students and the art curriculum of schools that is instead losing their interest. Berkowitz and Packer (2001) go on to explain that there is too little discussion in the field of art education on the value of using comic texts but share that they feel comic texts are motivational for students as well as educative based on the variety of issues they can help teach: "Teachers can focus on line drawing technique, history,

aesthetics, empowerment, or creative writing... Comic books present a low-cost, accessible, familiar and highly engaging medium to guide, entertain, and inspire students in many areas" (p. 13). This seems to point out that there are multiple creative benefits in the use of comic texts that are pedagogically sound if we'd only give time to considering them.

The consideration of the artistic elements of comic texts may also blend with the literature elements to create a deeper understanding and engagement on a variety of complex issues. One particularly complex issue may be that of readers who are experiencing psychological trauma. Blake (2010) explained that some comic texts, her focus here is on Moore's (1986) *Watchmen*, are especially suited to connect with readers as trauma fiction due to their presentational aspects. Since the both the text and visuals are often broken up by gutters, boxes, borders, pages, frames, etc. that sometimes stay apart from the other items on the page while other times connecting, or perhaps even intruding by overlapping each other in contemporary comic texts, the comic text form itself presents a visual narrative of connected-but-broken, integrated-but-disjunctive. The elements seem to work together to show "together" but "separate" in a manner that is key to trauma literature:

> Emotional impact, repetition compulsion, states of helplessness, and other symptoms of trauma can all be delivered through visual clues, such as color, panel size, and repetitive imagery. The combination of words and images provide many opportunities for illustrating the impact of traumatic experience. (Blake, 2010, para. 3)

What Blake shares here furthers the ideas that comic texts themselves aren't lower, easier reading, but instead, in their style of presentation, offer a unique opportunity to entice readers with a deeper engagement that is capable only because of the synthesis of word, visual, and presentation that comic texts allow. Can you imagine calling this frivolous? This is the essence

of what Wolk (2007) shared in the previous chapter when saying, "They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties" (p. 14). Thus, there are multiple elements here that battle the stigma approach that accuses comic texts of being too simplistic or frivolous for educational use. Yet, I'm not sure that the adults in my past who played the role of the bad guy wanting to ban comics from my reading activities would accept this, nor would the superintendent and his henchmen who stole comic texts from my students. Logic wasn't often a part of their argument so appealing to their judgement and anger with it may not have worked.

Bucher and Manning (2004) seem aligned with Wolk's (2007) premise that comic texts are a new entity that fuses separate elements together and with Blake's (2010) consideration that the style of comic texts allows them to teach certain elements rather well. Bucher and Manning (2004) explained,

> [G]raphic novels actually fuse text and art, which offers value, variety, and a new medium for literacy… In fact, some educators use graphic novels to teach literary terms and techniques such as dialogue, to serve as a bridge to other classics, and as the basis for writing assignments. (Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 68)

Yet, it may be that there are educators who are simply unaware of what these various comic texts may offer in terms of pedagogical value. The absence of comic use in the classroom doesn't always have to be nefarious or point toward some hidden agenda rife with stigma. In fact, there is a wide-range of areas comic texts may be of use if the teachers only knew:

> Several graphic novels present interesting biographies… *Dignifying Science*… provides a look at famous women in science… *Two-Fisted Science*… presents stories of scientists such as Newton, Einstein, and Galileo… science educators can use *Clan Apis*… to study

> the life of the honeybee, *The Sandwalk Adventures*… to look at Darwin's theory of natural selection, or *Fallout*… to examine the scientific and social aspects of the development of the atomic bomb... Several graphic novels explore social issues. Two such examples are Judd Winnick's look on AIDS in *Pedro and Me*… and Katherine Arnoldi's exploration of rape and pregnancy in *Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom*. (Bucher & Manning, 2004, p. 69)

There are many more courses, curricula, and topics that comic texts could bridge for students if educators were amiable and open to learning. However, beyond the specific courses and lessons that could benefit from comic text being included, there are also more general benefits for the overall being of the student. Carter (2007) proposed that comic texts can be transformative for students. He shared, "As a classroom teacher, I used them to help transform students' vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. As a college instructor in English education, I use graphic novels to transform licensure students' ideas and understandings about literacy" (Carter, 2007, p. 49). This transformation concept Carter (2007) proposed seems very close to what Chun (2009) called for in terms of students developing critical literacy and, as presented in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, a deepening of reading engagement. Moreover, while this might be cast aside as rather speculative, I'd also offer that students may more readily transform their thinking about learning when curricula leave the comfort of the traditional canon and use contemporary artifacts like comic texts to meet their needs.

Chute (2008) made the point, "Indeed, now is the time to expand scholarly expertise and interest in comics" (p. 462) for many of the same reasons presented in the previous paragraphs. Echoing Chute's (2008) position are Gallo and Weiner (2004), who add, "By opening the door and letting graphic novels into your classroom, you're bringing in a new world for students to

explore" (p. 117). And it may be important to focus on the consideration of student exploration there. Those educators who feel comic texts belong in the classroom often speak of the students' ability to engage in different ways, at different levels, and for different reasons with the comic texts. A young me, standing in the local market devouring comics, would likely label those educators the good guys. That was one of the key areas of impact for me as a reader. Even though there were countless distractions around me as I stood in front of the red comic rack at the market, I was engaging deeply, synthesizing, comparing, analyzing, etc. in a manner that, in hindsight, was filled with autonomy and praxis. These should be important goals of our classrooms, as much as grades and test scores. As such, I suppose comic text reading becomes more about the student and student experience than it does about traditional canon or curriculum. Hassett and Schieble (2007) explained, "The paradigmatic shift for education, then, is about leaving behind the idea that texts 'contain' information that readers 'receive' and moving toward an understanding that meaning is produced through active negotiation, conversation, and communication of individual values and thoughts" (p. 63). These are elements that comic text readers learn to make both among and between the frames of a comic text (McCloud, 1993).

And yet, sadly, it may be one particular rabbit trail that comes from this line of discussion that could, in fact, be part of what is unintentionally undermining the potential for comic texts in education. Some elements in this discussion of comic text use in the classroom present the comic texts as important because they are easier for struggling readers. This is often aimed at two particular styles of comic texts, the comic strip and/or comic book, but raises concern nonetheless. McVicker (2007) has crafted one example of an entry into this fold of discussion that may be used against the argument of complexity in comic texts. However, this would likely be due to a misappropriation of her work. McVicker (2007) posed the following point:

"Struggling readers, often unengaged with literacy in general, need a corrective approach to reading intervention--their ability to improve has to be based on building confidence with positive, successful reading experiences" (p. 86). What it seems some opponents of comic texts do is approach comic texts as if they are only for "struggling readers" and are then only used toward "building confidence" or some other valuable, but perhaps not academically rigorous, endeavor. What seems to be absent is the context in which McVicker framed her argument. She was focusing on early acquisition readers and using comic strips to bring them back to reading. McVicker (2007) also shared, "Using comics for instruction is a quick, concise way to teach, practice, and apply reading skills whether it is for initial instruction… or remediation of reading difficulties…" (p. 86). Again, opponents of comic texts, like my past superintendent from earlier in this chapter, may focus on elements like "quick" or "initial instruction" or even "remediation" and feel that comic texts hold no complexity, no depth of thought, even no challenge for students and should have no place in a classroom that isn't aimed toward remediation.

This is not what McVicker claimed in her writing, which is why I feel work like hers may be being misappropriated in this thread of discussion. Someone playing the role of hero, for example, being confused by murky context as playing the villain. However, making the claim that one comic text artifact, like the *Peanuts* comic strip, is aimed at initial instruction or remediation and then jumping forward from that one artifact, *Peanuts*, to the claim that all comic texts are inappropriate for older students seems to balance itself on an overly simplistic framework. It would be like claiming that all television is infantilizing and thus inappropriate for anyone over the age of six after viewing only episodes of *Barney and Friends* or *Sesame Street*. Consider the range of television shows we'd be mislabeling in that situation. Now, apply that same consideration to comic texts and you'll understand the frustration of this issue.

What arguments like McVicker's (2007) do is show the scope and diversity for age, reading level, and use with comic texts when discussed in conjunction with articles such as Blake's (2010) that aim at the various purposes of comic texts that may be a bit more deeply rooted and complex, such as *Watchmen* (1986). Yet, it seems rather obvious—yet strangely unobserved—that some comic texts can be best used in elementary classrooms for age and reading-level appropriate reasons and may not work in other classrooms while the same is true for other comic texts, other grades, and other reading levels. McVicker (2007) shared the following:

> Noted cartoonist Jim Davis stated that for 25 years he has been hearing from parents that their kids actually leaned [sic] to read thanks to his comic strip Garfield. This led him to wonder about the possibilities of having Garfield host an educational website for the purpose of learning to read and extending that to other subjects like grammar and vocabulary. (p. 86)

This is not the same student, age, or use, however, that Blake (2010) was considering in using comic texts for engagement as trauma literature. It seems like common sense to accept that different comic texts are appropriate or inappropriate for different ages of readers and for different educational uses. However, this is the logic and reason that often leaves certain administrators questioning, "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" It's as if some people in education conveniently—for them, not for comic text readers, educators, or students—ignore the variety, complexity, and depth of the various styles and levels of comic texts. Would I ever teach Moore's *Watchmen* (1986) to a class of third graders? No. In fact, if my own children's third grade teachers used an inappropriate (for age level) comic text in their class, I'd be one of the first people to voice disagreement with its use. Yet when my

children are in high school, I'll be one of the first people to share that same comic text, *Watchmen* (1986), with them. In reverse, I'd say that using *Garfield* in an elementary class, meaning no disrespect by using that particular comic text in this example, would be age and classroom appropriate, much like McVicker (2007) implied. However, if I had been using *Garfield* as my only text in a college reading preparation class for juniors and seniors in high school, I would have expected parents and administrators to question the comic text's lack of academic rigor.

What Might This Mean?

I understood when starting this chapter that it may seem strange to move from a personal narrative about book banning in my high school classroom to looking rather quickly into some of the discussion that is taking place revolving around why comic texts deserve a place in educational settings. I did this for a particular reason, though. First, I feel it was important to share some of the trials and tribulations that educators, like myself, may be experiencing when using comic texts in their classrooms. After Chapter 1's introductory discussion about stigma, I wanted to share an event in my own teaching experience that may carry subtle, or maybe not-too-subtle, hints of stigma if considered through that framework. I thought it was important to share that there are teachers, that there are classrooms filled with students, and that there are administrations having this battle. Again the lines between good and evil become blurred when we consider the various roles involved in this battle. There are good guys labeled as villains and bad guys labeled as heroes. Consider for a moment had I been at a school district where the administration accepted and encouraged the use of comic texts, I may have made the mistake of assuming all districts felt that way. I find myself wondering now: What if the secretary, in my

personal narrative earlier, who was offended by the titles on the receipt hadn't been paying such close attention? Would I have known or ever learned how the administration approached comic texts? I can't say. I hold the view now that there are various pockets of school districts with different approaches and considerations regarding comic texts. I couldn't possibly assume each district, each school, or each classroom was having the same experience simply because it was my experience. Yet, this is something it seems my past superintendent wouldn't have realized. That's where the importance of the second section of this chapter comes into play. It's almost like when considering these issues through a magnified lens, we see that the murkiness of right and wrong, or of good and bad as I've threaded into the discussion so far, become much more complex. Each perspective or each "side" of the issue, seems to feel they are right and the other side is wrong. This is complex because it implies the idea that everyone likely feels they're the good guy and whatever or whoever they are arguing against is likely the bad guy. Comic texts such as *Watchmen* contribute to humanities-oriented education by addressing issues of good-versus-evil and, in the tradition of good literature everywhere, raise complicated questions about what we think we know.

While there are likely educators who use comic texts effectively in their classrooms, whether elementary, high school, or college, and who have the support of their administration in that use, it shouldn't be assumed that is the same situation educators are experiencing everywhere. There are also likely educators who found an obstacle to using comic texts in their classrooms much the same as I did. It would be shortsighted to assume that there is only one approach about comic texts throughout the entire scope of education. What educators who use comic texts may experience is likely varied. Educators might find two, three, 17, or 30 articles that share pedagogical use of comic texts in a range of classrooms and with a range of student

ages and reading levels and might get mislead by an assumption that comic texts are accepted *everywhere*. The same problem could cause educators to stumble if they thought all schools were stigmatizing comic texts. Yet, it seems more likely to consider that these comic texts are accepted in some classrooms and school districts, while remaining unaccepted in others. Thus, does this prove the stigmatization or acceptance of comic texts? The answer seems to point toward neither.

When I was a child there was a commercial on television that I remember my mother repeatedly showed her disapproval toward. It was, as fate strangely plays out, a beer commercial. It had two groups of people arguing loudly in a bar about what made a particular beer so good. One group would yell that it, "Tastes great!" In response, the other group would respond that the beer was, "Less filling!" This back-and-forth would continue throughout the commercial until some narrator or announcer at the end would point out that both sides were correct. For whatever reason, that seems the epitome of much of the debate about comic text use in education. One side of the discussion on comic texts claims, "They're stigmatized!" Meanwhile, another group responds, "They're great for classroom use!" Now, I mean no disrespect to any position in this debate by sharing a comparison to a beer commercial. Instead, much like the end of the commercial shared, both sides could conceivably benefit from pausing to consider that there can be more than one answer to this issue. In some instances, I believe that educators and students are using comic texts effectively for a variety of reasons. In other instances, I believe educators and students may be experiencing elements of stigma associated with comic text use. It's a paradigm in which each thread adds different experiences to the pattern instead of attempting to verify or disprove each other. It's this consideration that different experiences can happen in different classes, with different students, and all of the

experiences may provide valuable insight that drives the next two chapters in this dissertation. And here I wonder, without direct purpose or intention, what would the young me, bouncing on the car seat on the way to the market with my mother, eager to get comics in hand, think of this debate?

CHAPTER 3: Using *Watchmen* in a College Course

In this chapter I share one phase of action research in my classroom, namely the events surrounding my teaching of *Watchmen* in a community-college humanities course. This is the first of two such phases of action research, both of which serve as sources for understanding how comic texts might be used in a college curriculum.

Philosopher and rhetorician, Kenneth Burke (1976) articulated an analogy for the ongoing conversations in academia:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (pp. 110-111)

Burke's anecdote (which is meant as an analogy to large-scale social interactions) is how I currently envision the ongoing discussion surrounding comic texts in society, including—but not limited to—educational and research settings. The discussion predates us, allows us a moment or two to make our say, then at some point beyond or after us, it will continue going in its own direction and pace. Akin to Burke's parlor, there are various threads of discussion in

contemporary scholarship addressing a number of issues around comic texts, such as stigma consideration from Chapter 1, pedagogical use from Chapter 2, and a variety of other topics including sexuality, violence, gender roles, and so on. I suppose even the ongoing consideration of good and bad, with all of the murkiness it might entail, would likely be part of the parlor as well.

At this point, however, I'd ask readers to consider the stigma around comic texts presented in Chapter 1. For now, I'll say once again that the scholarship addressing stigmas in comic texts shares that the comic texts themselves are often castigated as a frivolous genre, often requiring very little thought, which adds to or plays upon the perceived social ineptitudes of the comic text readers. Those considerations, against both the genre and reader, seem to lead to the social commentary like that shared by the superintendent during the book-banning event presented in the opening of Chapter 2 or the positions held by people, like my step-father, who feel comic texts are some trashy waste of time that will rot the brains of readers. However, there are a number of other issues to consider in the parlor, and over time there may be more connections built between these various avenues of thought and experience. My thoughts and experiences are a part of my entry into the parlor, and I'll continue to share my own bias about the issue of comic texts and related stigmas. That sharing may be a bit awkward and complex in and of itself, however, as I find myself unsure of my personal footing and stance from time-to-time. My own position seems to be evolving, or perhaps adapting, as I continue to consider the genre, field, and academic discussions. So to be transparent, I feel the need to share my own thinking to situate myself relative to the research topic and offer readers a better understanding of my experience and argument.

While I feel that I was stigmatized by my teachers, family, and friends as a child for

reading comic texts, and felt stigmatized by the superintendent and administration from Chapter 2, I find myself remembering those stigmas and too often treating them as if they are still current. I remember experiencing some of the stigma forms often discussed within the topic of comic texts as a child, but I'm not sure I still experience them currently at the same level today that I did two or three decades ago. I'd like to emphasize this point: As I sit here today, reading scholarship about comic text and considering use of the stigma consideration, I am appropriating the discussion and applying much of it to my youth to find a connection and build some type of personal understanding—because I don't feel stigmatized in the same manner or at the same level today. How could I? As a doctoral candidate, I am repeatedly engaged by colleagues, instructors, and students about my research with what feels like an earnest academic interest. And my reading of comic texts hasn't decreased over time. I apply the conversations about stigma to my youth or my past because I'm not sure whether the various items and indicants being discussed are actually generationally reproduced any longer. My concern at this point is that much of the discussion is based on the potentially archaic considerations of out-of-date stigma alive *somewhat* in current society, but mainly in our combined social collective memory. It could be argued that my experience with the superintendent from Chapter 2 would say the stigma is current. However, consider that the superintendent's approach may have itself came from a historical stigma and likely have nothing to do with contemporary comic texts. That's where the need for this chapter arises. It needs to begin wrestling with the murkiness associated with the stigma considerations, and the degree to which that murkiness adds some perspective on the perceived relationships between good and evil.

The research project explored in this chapter is intended to add to the current discussion in Burke's parlor on stigma in comic texts. The chapter is needed to help add a contemporary

voice to what runs the risk of becoming an area of discussion that looks back historically *at* stigma instead of looking around presently *for* stigma. Another aspect of this chapter that seems needed in Burke's parlor is that it isn't aimed primarily at comic text readers. Asking a 30-or 40-something-year-old comic text reader whether he or she feels stigmatized by the hobby of reading comic text may have them considering decades of past experiences wherein they share feelings pointed toward the concept that they "were" stigmatized once but may not clearly address whether society is still stigmatizing the genre and reader today, or only whether it "did" in the memories of their past experiences. This chapter is needed to consider how the genre and/or readers are stigmatized today—based on contemporary attitudes, experiences, and cultural tendencies—if only to pull the aspects of discussion that are based on the reminiscence of comic text stigma into a contemporary framing of the discussion. Yet, it can't do that if comic text readers or comic stigma theorists are the only voices involved in the inquiry. If it were me being asked about my experiences, those experiences would start with the red comic rack at the market, race through the different stances of my parents and many of my teachers, and move forward to the book banning event that itself could have been built from past prejudice. This is why I've selected to attempt a more balanced account of the perspectives via the pre- and post-reading survey basis for the action-research study conducted here. It's not that I want to dismiss the prior experiences as much as I'd like to consider current experiences as well.

Some current threads of discussion orbiting comic text stigma seem to ebb and flow from the cause of such stigma to ways to battle the stigma or even to the point of the weakening of the stigma. Considerations of this, as discussed earlier, not only point out that comic texts lead to various social ills (Tabachnick, 2007) and unsavory social labels (Botzakis, 2009; Lopes, 2006) for the text and reader but also that there seems to be a growth in the acceptance and use of

comic texts today in education (Chun, 2009, Goreman, 2003, Schwartz, 2002; Versaci, 2001; Wolk, 2007). The exact cause of this growth is uncertain. Some literature subtly considers an increase in critical analysis in the classroom as an indicant of comic text acceptance (Botzakis, 2009; Dardess, 1995; McVicker, 1993). Other pieces of literature point toward a gradual increase in visual nature of society via indicants such as an increase in television use, the onset and increase in Internet use, acceptance in pop culture, or symbols (e.g., pictograms, semiotics, and the like) helping to bridge language barriers from word to illustrative symbol in a world engaged in global communication (Botzakis, 2009; Bucher & Manning, 2004; Chun, 2009; Dardess, 1995; Gallow & Weiner, 2004; Schwartz, 2006). Still, as a child none of that made comics more engaging to me. As I reflect, the best explanation I can give as a comic reader is that I was engaged because they were comics, not because they were more like television or some other item.

Before moving forward, however, I suspect a brief review of the discussion about comic text stigma shared earlier may add further insight into Burke's parlor on this issue and share understanding toward why this study is needed. As was pointed out in Chapter 1, Tabachnick (2007) shared that comic text pieces are often held up as the reason for a host of problems connected to young people: "At best, they have been seen as a childish diversion and, at worst, as texts that deaden intellect and moral reasoning, linked with juvenile delinquency and a host of other social ills surrounding young people" (Wertham, 1953, as cited in Tabachnick, 2007, p. 50). The associated stigmas then often begin to label the readers of the artifacts themselves as Lopes (2006) explored: "Most people, and when I say people I mean women, consider comic book readers dirty, overweight, acne ridden, and immature geek perverts" (A Fanboy on the iFanboy website as cited in Lopes, 2006). Furthering this particular line of stigma, Botzakis

(2009) explained the discredited social identity accompaniment in another way: "When people think of comic-book readers, they typically get a vision of a stunted person who lives in his parents' basement and spends countless hours arguing the minutiae of his particular popular culture interests" (p. 50). Part of the explanation for Botzakis is the infantilizing words, such as Batman's "Pow!" or "Bam!" sound effects, associated with the genre but another part may be the paradoxical conversations surrounding comic text readers debates on intimate minutiae like who would win in a fight between "Hulk" and "Thor." A debate I've enjoyed a time or two myself. While Botzakis' (2009) painting of the comic fan as childish seems altogether different from Lopes's iFanboy (2006) overweight pervert framing, both show the comic reader as the unaccepted outsider, the social deviant, albeit for different reasons. This all points toward a deviant portrayal as representative of how the comic texts themselves have been looked upon in the United States for many decades.

The need for this study seemed apparent again when considering that while many of our colleagues enmeshed in this discussion are explaining the production or reproduction of the associated stigma as it has been historically, there isn't much debate pausing to ask whether the stigma is still as culturally ingrained in society itself or in the social identity of the comic text reader as it once was, or even the ways in which it may be evolving, increasing, decaying, and/or transforming. What this chapter aims to add to Burke's parlor dialogue is the responses of contemporary adult students regarding their own stigma consideration, orientation, or lack thereof, in concern to comic texts.

What to Ask and Why

One of the courses I teach at a small community college in mid-Michigan is a Humanities

course on American Studies. The course focuses on cultural tensions and myths that, over time, have worked to create the societal consideration of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. In that class, I ask students to read three texts: *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, by Howard Zinn (2005); *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain (1885, reprint 2010); and *Watchmen*, by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (1987). These pieces offer a non-textbook history via Zinn's 2005 piece, a classical novel via Twain's 1885 piece, and a graphic novel via Moore and Gibbon's 1987 piece. The course, designated Humanities 252: American Studies II, is an elective course that pulls its enrollment from any and all degree programs at the college and has no prerequisite course requirements.

While this study will not focus on the demographic considerations and data-points of students involved, it may prove helpful to understand the responses received within the study if we understand the demographics of the community college and its courses as a whole. The American Studies course offers a seemingly random sampling of students, such as nurses, accountants, welders, graphic designers, computer programmers, and so on from semester-to-semester. In other words, it isn't dominated by one program or one area of study. Also, the student demographic is quite diverse in terms of age. There are a surprisingly large number of dual-enrolled high school students who enroll in these courses each term while looking for early college credit. Then there are the traditional college students freshly out of, or a few years removed from, high school. There are also the middle-aged adults often claiming to be looking for advancement or re-training for the work force. And finally, there are a portion of students who are more "experienced" in terms of age, returning to college for an untold list of reasons in advanced years. Thus, in surveying a class with no prerequisites and required for no particular degree, there is usually a diverse mix of majors, interests, ages, and experiences. The reasons

demographics aren't considered in the analytical framework may be important to know as well. As such, the demographic data points aren't being used because the focus of inquiry for this study is the existence of stigma and how it might be evidenced, not "who" feels stigma based on gender, age, socioeconomic status, GPA, or other such labels or labeling factors. That in itself would be a different study and discussion thread in Burke's parlor. I chose this focus away from demographics because it didn't matter as a child who the person was that was telling me comics were a waste of my time; it mattered why they thought it. Also, it didn't matter if they thought that they were helping me in some way, saving me from hurting my eyes or damaging my thinking; it mattered if they were taking something valuable from me. After all, isn't that what many bad guys try to do? Then again, Robin Hood took something the rich valued from them and gave it to the poor.

I stated in a previous section of this chapter that my concern at this point is that much of the discussion about comic texts and associated stigmas are based on potentially archaic considerations of out-of-date stigmas. That concern leads to my study question: Are people still stigmatizing comic texts in a contemporary academic context, or do they feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner? However, I can't simply ask this question to a course full of students and expect the complexity held in high esteem for the tenants of Burke's parlor to be realized. Thus, this research study will attempt to answer the question through a pre- and post-survey that will be then synthesized into the Burkean parlor conversation through a blending of reader-response and deconstructive critical approaches.

I began by giving a pre-reading survey to my students to consider whether the potential stigma of using a graphic novel in our community college educational setting may produce the same reaction as seen in the various generations of discussion taking place involving stigma.

During the first week of the course, I presented students with an anonymous, optional questionnaire posing three considerations:

1. Have you ever read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the Unites States* or any other non-textbook history texts? What do you think about books like this?
2. Have you ever read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or any other classical novels? What do you think about books like this?
3. Have you ever read Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or any other graphic novels or comic books? What do you think about books like this?

Students were asked to answer the survey anonymously because I hoped they'd feel safe, free of reprisal, without grade, status, or label considerations hinging on their responses. Responding to the survey was optional, not required. I did this because I could only imagine the battle I'd feel, both psychologically and mentally, if I had been the student getting asked these questions. I might worry about it being a trap as I did when John approached me with a copy of *Watchmen* in his hands. What if the teacher was secretly attaching comics? What if they were one of the bad guys trying to trick me? It became quite important to try and share some element of emotional security, if such a thing exists. The survey responses were then collected by a student and left in my office after class.

The study then concluded at the end of the semester, with a post-reading survey that posed the following prompt for consideration after having completed the course, and supposedly, reading the texts:

> At the beginning of this course you were asked to fill out an anonymous survey that asked questions about your experiences with the three course texts (*People's History, Huck Finn, Watchmen*) or similar texts in their respective genres. Now that you have

navigated the course, please reflect upon which of the texts you found yourself most actively engaging with and which texts, if any, you found yourself avoiding, postponing, skipping, skimming, etc. If you didn't read any of our text(s) in particular, please share why. What made you decide which text(s), or sections of texts, you would read - and which text(s), or sections of texts, you would ignore (if any)? What did you like and what didn't you like? Was there anything about our text(s) that surprised or disappointed you? Anything about our text(s) you would like to share that I haven't asked?

Again, students were asked to answer the survey anonymously and responding was once again optional. As with the pre-reading survey, a student collected the post-reading survey responses and left them in my office after class.

In asking pre- and post-reading survey questions that didn't specifically spell out my own research question, "Are people still stigmatizing comic texts, in a contemporary academic context, or feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner?," I had expected to find multiple positions and variations of individual "truths" as to how students may approach the comic based texts. In my mind, the world would be filled with people who were either lucky enough to have experiences like I did by reading at their own comic racks in their own markets, wherever and whatever they may have actually been, or people who never had the opportunity I did to fall in love with the pages of a great comic. However, by incorporating the other course texts into the questions as well, my hope was to shield any obvious nature or overt focus on comic oriented texts—in this case, Moore's *Watchmen* (1987)—to produce a survey with room for flexibility and potential based on each student's individual experiences. I asked about each of the texts to mask my focus and interest imbalance toward their responses to the comic texts experience. A further purpose in asking about each genre style of text used in the course was to

allow a comparison analysis thread in the responses offered for each text to see whether differentiation of response for each genre of text may add insight to potential stigmas held, felt, or saw by respondents at a later time. My initial thinking about what this potential comparison could do in terms of other potential studies is to show that consideration of stigma for one genre or text wouldn't do much good to claim comic texts were stigmatized if in fact all the texts and genres in the survey could be shown to be stigmatized. To put it more clearly, I wouldn't want to say a student is stigmatizing comic texts because he or she won't read them if the student doesn't read anything, in which case I could be misappropriating the stigma of *all reading* into a stigma of comic texts themselves. That was a very important point in this framework. However, it also considered students who may respond like John from Chapter 2 who claimed they didn't like reading, even though they appreciated comic texts.

Originally, my purpose with this study was to see whether contemporary college students would show signs of stigma when considering comic texts in an academic setting. However, as my research began to come to life, I was struck by the startling realization that what my students said regarding the comic texts may not be a completely honest evaluation of their feelings with those texts. What this realization has done to the purpose of this study is to complicate it on multiple levels. It's just as murky to me now as much of the good guy versus bad guy issues had been as a child. On one level, to answer the research question originally considered (Are comic texts still being stigmatized, in a contemporary academic context?) is still a viable part of the study. However, the question has hidden layers of complexity when paired with student actions throughout the course. This pairing of student actions to student responses has created a deeper purpose of my study: Namely, to help address my own unresolved questions and footing about the possible archaic nature of stigmas in my own internal dialogue with contemporary

scholarship through considering both the context and responses of my students. I'm searching for personal insight and struggling with understanding whether stigmas are still being actively produced and reproduced due to the implied "deviant" nature of the genre and readers, or—as my thoughts seem to wander toward at this moment—are the stigmas from previous generations only being kept alive in academic discussion due to the memories those in Burke's parlor have of them? Also, is there space in the ongoing academic conversation of comic text stigma to consider the complexity of such results?

Complicating Context

As explained previously, the method of conducting this research was through a survey broken into pre- and post-reading elements. Both elements of the survey, the pre- and post-reading, were given to students in a community college course, Humanities 252: American Studies II. The survey elements were both presented as anonymous, optional, and ungraded. I left the room for each element, allowing students 30 minutes to complete the pre-reading survey at the beginning of the semester and another 30 minutes to complete the post-reading survey at the semester's end. The survey responses were collected by a student volunteer and left in my office at the completion of the survey.

The methodological reasoning behind conducting the survey utilizing the methods shared above was aimed at three primary goals: 1) Allowing students a relatively safe, reprisal-free environment, to share their thoughts; 2) Attempting to create an atmosphere wherein authentic, honest responses were likely to be given, and 3) The pedagogical goal of getting to know my students and their experiences with the genres of our texts before designing possible approaches to our texts. Those key elements were of utmost importance in considerations for this study. I'm

often wary of classroom environments that feel like students' responses may lean more toward what they feel the teacher wants to hear instead of what the students may truly believe, so much so that I introduce authors who focus on getting students to focus on their own voice more than the importance of audience consideration or negotiating the role of their voice and thoughts in the audience reception transaction (Elbow, 1987; Flower, 1994). Thus, by not prefacing the survey and explaining the purpose of my research, my students were put in a position wherein it would have been difficult to provide "What the teacher wants us to say" back to me since my stance on each text's genre should have been foreign to them. Of course, a simple analysis would assume I thought the texts held at least some importance or I wouldn't use the texts in the course. I also tried to battle this a bit, although in hindsight I wish I would have been more accepting of it, by adding the anonymity in an attempt to shield students from concerns of "answering incorrectly" or some such anxiety. This should have been further highlighted by the "optional" tag that accompanied the survey as well. Even the fact that grading or points weren't connected to the survey response process should have added to the "safe" feedback atmosphere. By making the survey optional, anonymous, and grade free, the methodological approach was intended to make an air of engagement, wonder, and interaction. Students' voices and thoughts were being asked for without threat of reprisal or "carrot-on-a-stick" (extra credit) mechanisms. What I wanted to do was to set the tone by getting a glimpse of the actual thoughts and positions my students held, not the thoughts they might craft in hopes to appease me for a better grade. In some ways, I was hoping it would be like the days I spent in front of the comic rack when another comic reader would stop by and start looking at the various comics offered for sale. Sometimes, casual chit-chat would start regarding our thoughts and theories. It was something of this ilk that I had hoped to create in the survey.

In terms of data analysis, my considerations of this were rather simple at the outset. I would focus on student responses to question three on the pre-reading survey, "Have you ever read Alan Moore's *Watchmen* or any other graphic novels or comic books? What do you think about books like this?" I intended to take the pre-reading surveys and group them in three clearly designated categories: 1) clearly show some form of a stigma perspective; 2) subtly, but not clearly allude to stigma; and 3) no stigma evident. These categories were then going to be used to frame the post-reading survey responses by focusing on any discussion of the comic text. Once organized into the various categories, I would use student responses as dialogue to either battle against, or stand beside, whatever the specific case may be, current discussants in Burke's parlor focusing on comic text stigma. Yet, my plan died before coming to fruition. The student responses in the pre-reading survey were at times too vague, and at other times too complex, to simply say "yes," "no," or "some" stigma. Thus, a slight revision to designated categories became needed. Those categories became more flexible: 1) read and like comic texts; 2) never read but interested to read comic texts; 3) no interest in comic texts. Thus, a respondent might say he or she has never read a comic text but is looking forward to it. That doesn't necessarily scream of stigma. My efforts in revising the designators are aimed at making sure this study doesn't run the same risk of assumption that I worry the comic text discussion in the Burkean parlor is running. I don't want to create suspicion of stigma where there is none or where the stigma consideration is based on non-contemporary positions. This is too close to what I felt the superintendent from Chapter 2 had done. He and his associates had created an issue without reading the items they were challenging and were making decisions on faulty information. I wanted to try and avoid this because it seemed rather foundational to me of what one of the bad guy types would do with half-truths.

Once the framework for considering the pre-reading responses became better suited to the study's purpose, I found myself needing to frame the manner in which the post-reading surveys would be analyzed and deconstructed for the parlor. The mechanism for the post-reading responses seems a bit clearer since the students would have read (presumably and hopefully) the graphic novel during the semester. Thus, the post-reading surveys are considered in terms of the following: 1) read and liked the comic text; 2) read and didn't like the comic text; 3) didn't read the comic text (when shared by the respondent) and 4) no comment or feedback on the comic text. To be clear, I categorized these only as a matter of giving an idea of where students may have started and may find themselves at the end of the course. I did not further categorize the survey responses because I thought they could prove, unequivocally, any position around stigma.

Things That Surprised Me

Presentation of findings for the pre-reading surveys feels rather simplistic at the outset. Of the 33 students registered for the course, 19 students chose to respond (please remember, this was optional, anonymous, with no grading impact). The commentary of the 19 respondents placed them, at least for the time being, in the three categories as follows:

Table 1
Pre-Reading Survey Breakdown

Category	Number of Students
Read and like comic texts	3
Never read but interested to read comic texts	12
No interest in comic texts	4
TOTAL	19

Interestingly, in each response there seemed at least one sentence, but was often more, that

allowed some moderate clarity of which category the student indicated.

Analyzing the pre-reading survey gives some considerations to begin framing for further post-reading analysis. At the outset, the pre-reading survey findings do not seem surprising. Nearly the same number of students who shared that they did read and like comic texts, three, shared they had no interest in comic texts, four. The middle number, however, the 12 students who don't read comics but are interested, seems relevant. Here's an idea of why: if the stigma considered in contemporary comic text discussion is true (Botzakis, 2009; Bucher & Manning, 2004; Lopes, 2006; Gallo & Weiner, 2004; Tabachnick, 2007), doesn't it seem like the number of students interested in trying out a comic text for the first time should be lower? Stop there for a moment, please. That is an important point to consider for a moment. If the genre truly was stigmatized, and I say that because I don't rightly know whether it is stigmatized any longer, shouldn't these people have an aversion to reading comic texts? If society really does see comic text readers as the acne-ridden, socially inept perverts characterized by many academic discussants (Lopes, 2006; Tabachnick, 2007), wouldn't that dissuade people from trying them out? I realize, here, some people may feel this line of thought is speculative and far reaching, and thus inappropriate. It may be speculative, but in this context, in this forum, speculation based on educated analysis and considerations should not be shrugged off so easily. Those same readers likely wouldn't as readily try a culturally negative stigmatized activity themselves, which is my point here, especially once we consider that this "trying" of the activity is taking place in a public context via the classroom. Students are asked to do this in an environment that may produce a gamut of social and cultural pressures with varying degrees and levels of comfort. I know this because I experienced many of these pressures in the classrooms of my youth as a student and in the classroom of my profession as an educator navigating a book-banning event.

To be fair and open, those considerations of social and cultural pressures made me question how to interpret the responses from the four students who shared they had no interest in comic texts. Just because they were uninterested in comic texts doesn't necessarily mean they stigmatized comic texts. We were, during that first week of class, in a room full of strangers. Regardless of the safeguards I attempted to produce for the survey, I couldn't guarantee students would feel safe enough to give authentic responses if they had a history experiencing a stigma with the text. My own experiences complicated this further. I had experienced various levels of stigma with comic texts and it didn't dissuade me from reading them. What might that imply? I wondered whether these students truly had no interest or they simply weren't comfortable sharing their interest. *That* might show stigma. Out of respect for these students, I hold their responses authentic but interpret them as beginning to show a sort of disconnect. Yet, this concern—or more aptly, consideration—toward disconnect will be something I return to later. Since the results of the pre-survey seemed to imply that students didn't have an aversion to comic texts, nor did they seem to overwhelmingly hold onto some stigma of comic texts, I decided to approach the use of the comic text in our course as any other text. I didn't feel I'd have to address potential stigma or battle it in preparing for reading or discussion. For now, I'll leave the pre-reading survey and responses in their current form: i.e., rather simple and taken at face value for analysis purpose as we move into the post-reading survey responses.

Analysis of findings for the post-reading survey also began to complicate this project. The post-reading survey started to offer something akin to the old rusty squeaking of the red metal comic rack of my youth. Something was just a bit off and was causing a bit of a squeak in the mechanism of my thoughts. Of the 31 students still registered for the last week of the course, 20 students chose to respond (again, the survey was presented as optional, anonymous, and no

grading impact). The commentary of the 20 respondents placed them in the four categories that follow:

Table 2
Post-Reading Survey Breakdown

Category	Number of Students
Read and liked the comic text	7
Read and didn't like the comic text	1
Didn't read the comic text	7
No comment or feedback on the comic text	5
TOTAL	20

Again, in each response there seemed at least one sentence, but often more, that allowed some moderate clarity of which category the student indicated. As a reminder, these responses came from the post-reading question:

> At the beginning of this course you were asked to fill out an anonymous survey that asked questions about your experiences with the three course te*xts (People's History, Huck Finn, Watchmen*) or similar texts in their respective genres. Now that you have navigated the course, please reflect upon which of the texts you found yourself most actively engaging with and which texts, if any, you found yourself avoiding, postponing, skipping, skimming, etc. If you didn't read any of our text(s) in particular, please share why. What made you decide which text(s), or sections of texts, you would read - and which text(s), or sections of texts, you would ignore (if any)? What did you like and what didn't you like? Was there anything about our text(s) that surprised or disappointed you? Anything about our text(s) you would like to share that I haven't asked?

Analyzing the post-reading survey begins my descent into uncertainty and brings back into the Burkean parlor my earlier concerns about disconnect between response and action. Based only on the feedback given in the survey, I might be able to carefully spin my analysis into looking like there was little stigma felt in the students who voluntarily participated. Looking at the post-reading survey responses, there were seven students who read and liked the text compared to one student who read and didn't like the text. But what do I do with the seven students who admittedly didn't read the text or the 5 students who didn't comment on the text? Do I get to conveniently ignore them? Do they not play a role? I can't prove why seven students didn't read the text. I can't say with certainty that it was for reason "x" or "y" since they didn't say it was due to any specific reason. So what do I do with this information? Well, I find myself wanting to go off the traditional academic script. Research, we know, doesn't exist in a vacuum. And, adding to that consideration, any sophomore student studying rhetoric should be able to explain the importance of context. Thus, in analyzing the post-reading surveys, I'd like to add something about the class that doesn't show up in the survey and runs the risk of derailing this study completely. This is where a number of readers may condemn me for editorializing. In short, I'd like to explain why the squeaking shows the research to be a bit off center.

I share the following "off survey" information to show a different level of consideration in this study. I cannot, in good faith, simply share data points from the pre- and post-reading surveys and ethically say the survey responses do "x," "y," or "z" in terms of adding to our discussion on stigma, or that stigma is so simplistic it can be measured with responses that themselves do not have a certain level of safety regarding authenticity. When I experienced the journey with these students who would not, given repeated chances and stimulations, read the comic oriented text, that may imply something about comic text stigma that their answers do not

clearly convey. But even now, I'm not sure precisely what it might be saying. Once again, I'm left feeling the circumstances are murky and I'm worried that there may be too many factors in the contextualization of the situation to honestly point at a single indicant let alone multiple indicants, and say with confidence, "I have uncovered proof!" After this experience, I'm not sure I have anything to offer under the guise of proof. However, I will later offer suggestions and possibilities, which in themselves are often useful in Burke's parlor.

After introducing the *Watchmen* and positioning it as a political tool, I asked students to read the first five chapters (approximately 90 minutes of reading). This amount was common to us and a reading amount we had become acclimated to throughout the course. At our following class, as we circled our desks and tried to begin the discussion, there was mostly silence. I asked whether here were any comments about the reading that could start us off and received silence. I sat quietly myself for a few seconds before I began counting the seconds of silence in my head: 1, 2, 3... 13, 14, 15. I commented on how it was strange for our class to be silent for so long, and it earned me a tense chuckle from the class. This had been a class of students who easily engaged in discussion. They seemed natural talkers when responding to other readings, video clips, or new theories, so the silence itself felt out of place. I asked what happened to make us so quiet. One young woman shared that she didn't find the time to do the reading. A middle-aged man sitting next to her added he had forgotten and our class circle slowly began gaining head nods and smiles. It led me to ask whether anyone was able to do the reading. Silence. Motionless. For whatever reason, no one had read, or *would admit to the class*, that he or she had done the reading. I feel it important to add that at that moment my head was swirling. What should I say? They hadn't read the comic text. Were they secretly the bad guys? Yes, I recognize a bit of paranoia here in my concern. This hadn't happened in our class before; we

had already read multiple chapters of Zinn (2005) and read Twain (2010). Those texts were read and discussed, for the most part, without similar problematic issues that I recognized at the time. To be fair and honest, my mind did race to labeling the class quickly as villains who, like my step-father, looked down on reading comic texts. However, I managed to battle that line of though and fought to approach this with a more open mind. I have repeatedly found that labeling people as heroes or villains isn't easy in the murkiness of an unclear moment.

What I decided was to deal with the day as an anomaly. I shared that these things happen and we have to be flexible enough to roll with the punches. It was disappointing to not be able to talk about the reading, but we could give it another chance next time. I asked if we would re-do the reading for the next class period instead. A large chorus of nods and verbal responses of, "Yes!", "Sure!" broke out. So for that period, we discussed the concept of "safety" in our culture and what it meant or implied. Who did we have to be safe from? What made people feel unsafe? Was it possible that safety was an illusion? What did safety mean historically? Why might the concept of safety be considered a myth? What might it mean in the future? And so on... Of course, fans of the *Watchmen* will realize I was foreshadowing a complex theory threaded within the book. However, as we discussed the topic that day in class, I didn't refer directly to the comic text. In retrospect, this may have been a mistake on my part. Instead, at the end of class, I pointed out that our discussion was part of the hidden theory behind the *Watchmen* and added that it tackled the idea of safety in much the same manner we had. This was an attempt to bridge what we were doing in-class to the comic text. If I had an opportunity to do it differently, I wish I had paused the discussion sooner and actually gotten everyone into reading the comic text to make connections between the discussion and text themselves, in a timelier manner. However, I didn't do that and, as such, I may have contributed to the problem.

I'm not precisely sure what I'm about to share might imply. However, I feel it needs to be shared to add to the context of this study. Our next class period held our highest amount of absences to date and we were well over halfway through the course. While it had been common to have two or three people absent per class, we had nine absences on this day. It may have simply been an anomaly, but it might speak to something else. Our discussion circle was formed and I branched out with a question about the reading, asking whether anyone saw the reading connected to our previous discussion on safety. Someone responded that they read it, but didn't like it. Someone else jumped in quickly and added that the pictures were confusing. Someone else built quickly on that and said they didn't get the point of the reading. Someone else then chimed in that the first few pages didn't make sense so she stopped reading it. And these comments drew an avalanche of head nods, even though they did not signal any connection to the question about safety. And there was no follow-up, no vigor, no passion, and no explanation in these statements. When I asked "why" following any of these statements, what I received was most often some version of, "I don't know." And then silence overtook the room. I counted seconds, then asked again whether anyone could draw connections between our discussion on safety and our first five chapters. There was a long silence and absence of eye contact. These were intelligent, witty people. They weren't lazy, apathetic, or unintelligent people, or whatever label someone might place upon them from their silence. They were capable of having this discussion *if they had read the piece*. I asked for a show of hands, how many people were able to read all five chapters for today. Not a single hand went into the air. I managed a caring smile and asked why? I shared I wasn't mad; I wasn't angry; I was just confused. Why hadn't anyone completed the reading? The feeling I had at that moment was much the same as when the principal came into my high school classroom and explained the need to lock my cupboards and

to stop sharing the books of my classroom library. I was feeling uncomfortable similarities to past experiences when comic texts were deemed unworthy trash that would rot our minds.

One student said he had to work; another said her child was sick; someone else forgot the book at a friend's house; and a flurry of other such explanations. At this point, I was on unfamiliar ground and will embarrass myself with what happened next: Having the weekend ahead of us, I said that we needed to get back on pace with the time we'd lost trying to make the reading up... so I assigned Chapters 1-9, roughly 3 hours of reading total (not my best idea) and explained that to give more course-oriented meaning to the reading, we'd have an in-class assessment of the reading when we came back next week. Someone asked whether that was like a quiz, and I responded yes, it was like a quiz. I said the assessment would measure our thinking about the reading and our ability to synthesize the reading with our course concepts and discussions so far. Someone asked whether notes would be allowed, and I shared my thoughts that using notes was a good and fair idea. Then, after only those few minutes of class, I dismissed class and said I had nothing further to do if we hadn't done the reading. Looking back, I realize we could have even done the reading together there, but for some reason, that idea had escaped me while in the moment. Maybe I was acting the part of the bad guy in that scene. It has easily been one of the worst moments of teaching I've ever experienced. I wasn't ready for it and, in hindsight, handled it rather poorly. As I look back at the situation now, I can't tell where the lines differentiating the good guys or bad guys were drawn. Was I a villain who felt like hero or a hero who felt like a martyr? I can't imagine it was that murky for the students. I thought I was motivating them through threat of assessment. I was very much out of character and moving in a direction uncomfortable and foreign to me. Still, excuses aside, I should have done better.

The assessment I gave at the beginning of our next class wasn't aimed at proving anything "right" or "wrong," per se. It aimed at complexity, even though I only asked three questions:

1. Consider two of the following characters (Dr. Manhattan, Nite Owl, Rorschach, and The Comedian) in terms of what they might represent for the mythos of machismo in the United States. If you get stuck, consider what they wear, what they say, and what they do and consider comparing them.
2. What might be some reasons that Silk Spectre's relationship with Dr. Manhattan is or isn't symbolic of a "traditional" relationship in the U.S. What are you basing that on?
3. In your opinion, does Rorschach seem more like a hero, anti-hero, or villain by U.S. cultural standards? Does he feel or provide "safety" as we considered the topic in class last week?

That was the entire assessment. It's not a bad quiz, even though I don't much care for quizzes in general (Read that as: "This is the first quiz I've given in the last decade."). Twenty-nine "quizzes" taken. Six students aced the quiz. Twenty-three failed it. Clearly failed it. Failed it with answers like this response to Question 2: "Trick question, were they in a relationship?" That was it. Nothing else. Notes were allowed. What strikes me as so very strange in reflection is that it didn't feel wicked when I was doing it. It looks horrible in my memory as I type this, but in the moment that it was all happening, I responded in a knee-jerk manner with words and activities I don't support or believe in. I wonder if that's how most villains are created. They find themselves doing bad things, but felt forced into their actions by other reasons (or some such metanarrative).

My research question posed originally was aimed at asking whether comic texts are still

being stigmatized in a contemporary academic context. However, I was also searching for insight on my own unresolved questions and footing about the possible archaic nature of stigmas in my own internal dialogue with contemporary scholarship. And based on the responses from the pre-reading and post-reading surveys presented, I could say—*could say*—with some *careful* interpretation that comic texts aren't being stigmatized as highly as Burke's parlor tends to suggest. I *could* show that the pre-reading surveys show interest and willingness, and that the post-reading surveys show a mixture of tastes and personal styles, not stigmatization. However, based on my experiences in the classroom with the respondents, I call into question the authenticity of the survey responses. I'll stop here for a moment and clarify that authenticity may not be the best word here. Maybe a better word would be something like missing connection or lack of correlation or perceived disconnection, although I'm not entirely sold on any of those either. There was some sort of disconnect between what the survey responses said and what the actions of the students in the class said. The words on the responses say one thing; the meta-language and actions of the class said another, with my actions adding even more murkiness to the context. I sort of chuckle when I think of the cliché that claims actions speak louder than words because the actions here, both mine and the students, tell many different tales depending on the perspective of the person interpreting them. And yet, I haven't come across many considerations like this in our academic conversations taking place in Burke's parlor yet. It leaves me wondering where are the questions of connection and implication related to stigma points in Burke's parlor. Just as importantly, how can I even attempt to join the parlor's discussion about comic text stigma with my survey responses that I do not believe carry a strong connection to the students' actions, while feeling regret for my own actions as a teacher as well?

Why the *Watchmen*?

Watchmen is, without a doubt, my single favorite comic text ever and that's saying something. Besides being an avid comic text reader, I am also a fairly serious comic collector. My collection is nearing 20,000 comic texts that range in date from the late 1960s to the present. I don't simply read comics, I immerse myself within them. I have a certain obsessive level of comic knowledge. When the owner of the local comic shop recently had a patron bring in a copy of a rare comic (*Amazing Spider-Man* #1, 1963), he showed it to me to discuss grading of quality and pricing. My input was that it would grade out as a 2.0, worth roughly $1,700, which was where his approximation was also. I share my fanaticism with comic texts for you to understand that when I use a comic text in the classroom, I can share things our average colleague probably can't about comic texts. I understand the genre, the history, the evolution, even the trends of comics at a level that many non-comic fan educators do not. I can speak with knowledge on topics from costume changes to why many comic readers hate Rob Liefeld's work. I'm not attempting to sound a braggart; I'm trying to add context to the classroom experience I believed I presented with the use of a comic text. However, this doesn't mean I was a good guy or doing a good job.

When I spent an entire class period previewing the *Watchmen*, its history, political nature, placing it in a real-life timeline and landscape, I was attempting to entice students' interest. For example, the phrasing, "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*" or the translation, "Who watches the watchmen?" where the title *Watchmen* gains much of its meaning, is shown a number of times throughout the graphic novel. However, the phrase is never shown *fully* throughout the text. For example, on page 11 of Chapter 3 in *Watchmen* (each chapter begins numbering anew at 1) the bottom right panel shows a wall with some of the letters from the phrase showing. Letters in

parentheses, here, are hidden by panels or characters, positioning, angles, and other such items in the comic text itself. Capital letters here are shown in capital on the comic panel "(wh)O WATC(hes) (th)E W(a)TC(men?)." I spent time explaining what's believed to be the artist's intention here, as debated in various discussions about the piece, and the complexity with which comic texts allow that type of visual presentation. I even went so far as to explain the impact the *Watchmen* has had on the comic industry in the nearly three decades since it was first published. It was one of the first major titles to violate the self-imposed censorship the comic industry placed upon itself with the Comics Code Authority label of 1954.

I shared why that comic text is a rather big deal in the comic industry. I even went so far as to try to help build bridges of interest to the piece. For instance, I asked the class whether anyone had watched or heard of the 2005 movie *V for Vendetta*. A large portion of the class had watched it and a quick discussion broke out among students about how "cool" that movie was. I shared that *V for Vendetta* was a graphic novel first, written between 1982 and 1985, by the same author, Alan Moore, who wrote *Watchmen* in 1986 (in comic book form, republished in 1987 as a trade paperback). I tried to help students understand the cultural impact of the comic text in efforts to build interest. I left the classroom that day exhausted. If you've had days like that in a classroom, you understand what that may imply. As shared previously in this chapter, I asked students to read the first five chapters (estimated about 90 minutes of reading time) for our next class period and come back with questions and comments, paying attention to how the text may be questioning the myths we feel society presents today. When the students returned and hadn't read the piece, I was very confused. Looking back, I realize that I hadn't considered that the students may not be interested in the piece even though I was trying to make it interesting. In that moment, I didn't consider that what I had done may not have been the best practice for the

classroom. I felt like I was doing something heroic. However, I realize now that the manner in which I was presenting the text put me in the classical comic text role of being the hero who might have also been the bad guy—at least the bad teacher. At best, all I can say is that what I was doing was murky pedagogically, and may have added to the potential ability to claim stigma was present. Even if I was trying to be the good guy, I wasn't doing something good for my students.

Reflection

At one point, my own position on comic text stigma was moving to a place wherein I wondered whether stigma was only alive because those of us who may have felt stigma during our youth continued to consider it alive and well. I wondered if through the discussion of stigma, we were keeping a memory alive, a shell of a former stigma, but ignoring a contemporary absence of stigma, especially since there is a growing amount of discourse in academia about the use of comic texts as a mechanism to help students gain from and relate to experiences of the comic text characters. These experiences, often different from one reader to another, show that with different readers, thinkers, writers, and fans, we deal with a multitude of events that frame the background of the reader and comic text character. Thus, some educators are promoting a multiliteracy approach for today's needs that begins to weaken the consideration of comic text related stigma (Chun, 2009; Morgan & Ramanatha, 2005) as pointed out in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. The tools for such an approach, the comic texts, might be used in some areas to help develop 21st century, visual literacies. However, while this thread of thought does have support, I still question the idea that comic text are only a visual literacy and stand with Wolk's (2007) position that comic texts are actually their own type of literacy. However,

there are valid points made that share how some educators may be using comic texts to aid in their students practice of visual literacies. For instance, Chun (2009) contended,

> Graphic novels like *Maus*, *Barefoot Gen*, and *Persepolis*, about seminal events in the not-so-distant past, can mediate these historical realities with their unique visual narrative styles that allow many readers, especially adolescent ones, to imagine and interpret characters' experiences that are far removed from their own daily lives. (p. 146)

Regardless of whether we hold comic texts as a focus tool for visual literacy or not, the use of comic texts to branch out into other possible areas like visual literacy may actually battle the effect of stigma. Yet, what would I add to this line of reasoning based on my study's survey responses and my classroom experiences? This is the question that I've wrestled with most recently. How could I share student responses that have me questioning what I perceive to be a manner of disconnect between the experiences had in our classroom and the survey responses given by the students, even if crafted by my less-than-effective classroom methods?

Finally, with time, came a wonderfully simple answer: just share what you've learned. I only need share my experiences and concerns, blended with my interpretation of the experiences from this study flavored by my personal context. Stigma itself is likely a unique, personal topic, whether as a receiver of the stigma (comic text reader) or the wielder of a stigma (superintendent looking down on comic texts) and may not be something people openly share with comfort. Sadly, it may be the comic text version of the old race and sexuality clichés, framed through our stigma consideration, "I'm not a stigmatist! I have a friend who reads comics." In fact, perhaps the best service I can do for the Burkean parlor at this time is to share my experience, both on and off the survey script, as I've done here. I cannot say with any confidence, consideration, or *proof* that stigma is or isn't changing yet and much of that is due to the poor methodological

choices I made in the classroom. However, I can share that I had a very challenging time getting adult students engaged in reading a comic text in the classroom even though they claimed to be removed from a stigma via their survey responses and struggled to find a path through the comic text that was challenging but also enriching for students.

I think that is the type of research that needs to be considered when dealing with this question of stigma. Some people may disagree with this consideration. Some readers may feel that if this can't be rigidly measured, categorically organized, or precisely quantified in a more scientific framework it isn't academic or worthy of sharing. However, the supposed disconnect between survey responses and classroom actions, and the impact the classroom methodology had, may have been missed in various frameworks and it feels an important point here. As such, this study has helped me embrace the point that since I've learned from this research (learned to question my research, my framework, my pedagogy, my students, etc.) then something meaningful has happened. As a researcher, I realize that this was important for me to experience.

I want to understand how our human nature, our context, our teaching, or even our level of caring might have a large impact on our research, responses, and reflections. It is the unscripted reactions of our students that often creates a deeper story for us to consider. That's how it felt when John approached me with the *Watchmen* in hand (as explained in Chapter 2) and started a conversation about the reading of a comic text. Yet, I'm left with the familiar feeling of a strong lack of clarity. When I was a child reading comics in the market, spinning the red comic rack while looking for the next story to explore, I wrestled with questions that felt murky to me. I have that similar feeling with this chapter because, in the end, I don't feel this chapter should be used to promote the consideration that there is a stigma associated with comic texts. It also

should not be used to promote the decline of stigma associated with comic texts. What it might do, I hope, is show that considerations of stigma and the responses related to stigma of comic texts are both complex, ambiguous, and surrounded by complexities. And these issues need to be explored further for us to get a better understanding of the complexity of stigma in regards to comic texts.

CHAPTER 4: Using Lynda Barry's "Two Questions" in a College Course

At the end of the previous chapter of this dissertation, I found myself experiencing what felt like a complicated portrayal of student responses in comparison to student actions. I shared that because of the disconnection that appeared between the responses I used for that chapter's look at stigma with comic text and the students' actions when it actually came to engaging with the comic text, that I didn't think the analysis could confidently use the survey responses to say anything of certainty about comic text stigma. However, upon reflection, I'm not sure certainty was ever a part of the driving force that purposed the research study. Nonetheless, I shared that further exploration could likely reach a better understanding of comic text and the complexity of stigma in relation to comic texts, which seems a bit different than certainty. What I felt while considering those reflections was once again rather familiar. The feelings I experienced weren't much different than those I experienced during the book banning event from Chapter 2 or during the time I spent asking teachers why I wasn't allowed to read comics in their classrooms as a young student. That familiar feeling, where I'm being cast as the bad guy for asking questions people don't want to hear, has led me to reflect upon the research choices I made as well as reflect upon how they might have been better implemented. From those considerations, the research study in this chapter has emerged.

In this chapter, I will once again approach the same issue of stigma and comic text framed in previous chapters. As shared similarly in Chapter 3, the research project explored now in this chapter is once again intended to add to the current discussion in Burke's parlor on stigma in comic texts. The study is needed to further add a contemporary voice to what runs the risk, as shared earlier in this dissertation, of becoming an area of discussion that looks back historically *at* stigma instead of looking around presently *for* stigma. However, moving forward from the last

research project to the project considered in this chapter happens because of the disconnect that seemed apparent from the *Watchmen* (1987) study and my own discomfort with how best to place that disconnect into the Burkean parlor successfully. While it may sound rather corny, it feels like my younger self, standing at the comic rack, is quietly expecting me to do better. With careful reflection, I see how my choices in the classroom could have had a tremendous impact on the students' engagement/disengagement and perception of the text. I think the young me at the comic rack would see me as the bad guy, even if I liked comics, because I hadn't done my best. I had only done what I thought was best. It may be murky, but these are different.

The need for the focus in this chapter seems apparent again when considering that if the action and responses of the students engaged in this study could be viewed as having a correlation between the actions of the students during the course bridging to their responses on the pre- and post- surveys, then there may be something not only to consider in comparison to the previous chapter's study that could speak of stigma but also possibly speak on teaching, learning, research, pedagogy, and so on. What this chapter aims to add to the Burkean parlor dialogue is a new set of responses from contemporary adult students in regards to their own stigma consideration, orientation, or lack thereof, in connection to comic texts. However, I'm going to teach this comic text differently than I did the comic text from Chapter 3. This may, perhaps, give more insight into the stigma associated with comic text as explained in Chapter 1, or even the successful pedagogical integration considered in the second half of Chapter 2.

What to Ask, Why, and When

For the research project reported in this chapter, I decided to use another of the courses I teach at the same small community college in mid-Michigan. The course, English 111:

Freshman English Composition, focuses on reading and writing in the academic discourse. Historically, the course has followed various thematic units from year-to-year. For a few years, the thematic focus had been for students to problematize American education. Students would read, discuss, and wrestle with readings and ideas that showed inequities in the education systems many of them had experienced in their past or may feel they were currently experiencing. Then, they would be asked to synthesize their ideas with their various readings into an argumentative synthesis paper that showed some of the systematic issues they felt were complex and what impact those issues had on the educational system. Other years, the thematic focus would change to issues like technology in education, or globalization, or 21st century literacies. The semester in which the research for this chapter's focus took place, the thematic emphasis was on problematizing the complexities of adult learning.

The English 111 course is a general education requirement and currently fulfills the Freshman Composition requirement on the Michigan Transfer Agreement. This means that the student demographic that would take this course is fairly diverse. However, once again the demographic is not the intended focus of this study since, as shared in the previous chapter's study, the demographic data points aren't being used because the focus of inquiry for this study is the existence of stigma, not "who" feels stigma based on gender, age, socioeconomic status, GPA, and so on. Furthermore, the categorization and labeling of the students may be more important in other studies more aimed at a social science approach to this inquiry instead of the humanities oriented approach used in this dissertation. In short, this study isn't as focused on a larger numerical pattern (demographics) as it is interested in the existence, or even non-existence, of a particular thread (stigma) effecting the pattern.

As with the previous study, I gave a pre- and post-reading survey to my students (from

two different sections) to consider whether the potential stigma of using a comic text in our community college educational setting may produce the same reaction as seen in the various generations of discussion taking place involving stigma explored in the first two chapters. This is concerning because too many of our students see themselves as "just" community college students and if handled improperly, there would be a risk that they may think we were reading comic texts because they were "just" community college students. Consider, if they had past experiences with teachers who treated comic texts poorly, like the trash that would rot our brains position from my youth, they may too quickly assume the comic text use in our course was aimed at dumbing things down due to some inability on their part. That is, of course, far from my belief and reason for comic text inclusion. These surveys were aimed once again at the same research question I shared in the previous chapter of this dissertation for the *Watchmen* (1987) study: "Are people still stigmatizing comic texts, in a contemporary academic context, or feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner?" However, in this research, I made a number of important revisions to the approach based on the perception of disconnect and unhappiness with my own pedagogical choices, I felt occurred in the action research project with *Watchmen* from Chapter 3. First, I made a revision to the timing of the survey. This felt rather important. I reflected upon the study implementation of the prior chapter and realized that since the pre-survey was given in the first week of class, students likely hadn't had time to create for themselves a context of safety in their response. In Chapter 3, I shared my concerns that although I tried to craft "safeguards" for students in the pre- and post-survey implementation, I couldn't guarantee students would feel comfort or safety, especially during the first week of class. We hadn't gotten to know each other as a class in week one. As such, in the study for this chapter, I held the pre-survey off until the fifth week of the class, which felt like an important

revision. Thus, I moved the pre-survey to a spot in Week 5, much closer to the reading of the comic text.

However, another potentially important revision to the approach used this time was how I engaged students in the discussion of stigma before the initial pre-reading survey. For the study in Chapter 3, I shared that I didn't feel I'd have to address potential stigma or battle it in preparing for reading or discussion of the *Watchmen* (1987) comic text. In reflection, I believe I was wrong. This time, however, students actually needed to wrestle with the concept of stigma a bit more thoroughly because it was an element many of them were dancing around in the consideration of our class thematic unit on problematizing adult learning. Thus, through the first five weeks of reading and discussion in both sections of English 111 I was teaching, I slowly shared some of my own experiences and narratives about adult learning that framed stigma. I shared with them stories about my mother, a high-school dropout, and how that label seemed to stigmatize her. I talked about my parents' divorce when I was young and how the label "broken-home" seemed to carry its own stigma while I was a young student. I shared the rather personal information that my father left my mother because he had come out as a homosexual and how that label, in the late 1970s carried its own stigma for him, and strangely, a different stigma for my mother and me. I worked these stories into something like a narrative to help frame my mother's experience going to a community college in her forties. Going back to school was what my mother considered the biggest challenge of her life, and she often worried that she was simply too old to learn anymore, which itself could be an interesting stigma. These topics, of course, didn't happen all at once or even all in the same week. For some reason, I never shared the stigma I felt as a young reader who enjoyed comic text. I'm not sure of my reason for that.

Slowly, one class after another, I would share some of these anecdotes about my family,

my experiences, my thoughts with students in efforts to get them to share their own narratives. I'd bridge my experiences with readings or ideas we were discussing in class and, quite often, students would open up about their own stigmas. Why stigma in this freshman composition class? One young man shared that he wanted to be a motorcycle mechanic but his parents didn't want him to be a "grease monkey" who struggled through life. Another young woman wanted to be a doctor, but her family doubted her ability so talked her into being a nurse's aide instead. Another woman dropped her classes because the factory she had been laid-off from was calling her back to work and she was getting a raise to almost $9.00 an hour, more money than she had ever earned before. My experiences in teaching these classes for over a decade has offered an overwhelming number of students who would end up sharing their own experiences with stigma, which often included the stigma of being "community college" students. In this semester, with this study, many of my younger students—often straight out of high school or only out of high school for a short time—talked about what it felt like to say they were "community college" students to their friends and family. The older, nontraditional students, many of whom were displaced workers, shared how they felt stigmatized by having to go back to school after their factory closed or their job was downsized. The words "retraining" and "remedial" felt stigmatizing to many of them. I shared my experiences with stigma, then the students slowly joined me.

At the beginning of week four of the semester, after building the context of stigma explained above, I asked my students whether they thought there was any stigma toward reading in our society based on what they have experienced or witnessed in their own lives. Was it good to read some things but not others or to read in some settings but not others? The discussion that followed filled the next two class periods for each of my English 111 sections and carried us into

week five. The student responses were interesting, complex, and something I feel would warrant their own study. However, I could summarize the overall direction of the student input from each section, both my morning and afternoon classes, into the discussion like this: Reading is something many students didn't seem to do for fun anymore. As children, some of them thought reading was fun, but not all of them. As adult students now, there was seldom joy in "having" to read. I add special emphasis to the word *having* because students repeatedly shared they didn't like being forced to read things that didn't interest them. I understood this at a deep, personal level. I loved reading comics as a child, but put a textbook in front of me and require me to read something for no other purpose than a quiz and I'd secretly grumble. Some students also commented that many of their family members and friends didn't read for fun either, although no one seemed sure as to the reason their family or friends didn't read. Toward the end of the second day of discussion, I asked each class to consider why. Why, if reading was fun for us as children, did we lose our taste for it as adults? There was an overall disappointment that we had seemingly let this happen. Some students speculated the pace of life increased as they grew into adulthood and they didn't have time for reading anymore. It took too long. A few students began blaming technology, saying reading a book no longer gave the same engagement that technology does. Other students felt that education had stolen their love of reading from them by telling them what to read, what opinion to form, and then testing them on whether or not they were reading and thinking correctly, whatever that may imply. And at that point, I realized that many students had reached a place that Lynda Barry, the author of the comic text used in this study, echoed in her comic text "Two Questions."

To begin bridging the class discussion into the research for this chapter, I shared that one of the things I managed to retain from my youth was my love for reading comic texts. I shared

my meaning or defining scope of comic text in the same manner shared in Chapter 1 of this dissertation: I am referring to many subgenres including but not limited to the comic strip (like those in local newspapers), the comic book (the often monthly ongoing serial story), the comic trade paperback (a collection of comic books that entails a certain story arc bound together in one, sometimes hard-cover, binding), and graphic novel (a stand-alone story outside the arc of serial comics that visually looks very much the same as a comic trade paperback). I then went on to share that comic texts themselves might sometimes carry a stigma. I explained, fairly briefly, the line of debate in Burke's parlor between comic texts being stigmatized or not, educational or not, appropriate or not, and so on. I shared how opponents of comic texts can't seem to agree on whether the comic texts are frivolous, lewd, or infantile. However, I still didn't share my own experiences with comic text stigma. For the life of me, I can't fathom why. I shared about my childhood of poverty, my father's alternative lifestyle, my mother's dropping out of school, but I didn't choose to share my own demons around the comic text stigma. How this thing was too personal for me to share, but other seemingly personal factors came flowing freely from my thoughts I have yet to riddle out.

At the beginning of the next class session for both of my English 111 sections, I presented students with an anonymous, optional pre-reading survey posing the following considerations:

1. Have you ever read Lynda Barry's "Two Questions" or any other cartoon or comic style of piece?
2. What do you think about using cartoons or comics like this in our college course?
3. Is there anything you'd like to add about your experiences with cartoon or comic pieces?
4. Do you give me permission to use the responses on this paper anonymously in my own

writing, research and/or conference presentations?

Once again, students were asked to answer the survey anonymously in efforts to create an air of safety, free of reprisal, without grade, status, or label considerations hanging on their responses. Also, once again, responding to the survey was optional and I emphasized that this was not, in any way, a required element of our course. Not every student who was present in each section of the class responded, which gave me 26 pre-reading surveys to consider. The student responses will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. However, the stylistic changing of the questions themselves was another important revision that took place in this study. The questions for this study focused on the singular comic text reading because I wasn't trying to mask the importance of the comic text any longer behind the other readings. Instead, I openly shared my interest in comic text and asked students to share their thoughts if they so pleased. After taking the survey at the beginning of class, we moved directly into reading Lynda Barry's "Two Questions" together in small groups, roughly three or four people per group. I was, due to reflection and analysis, trying to teach this comic text better than I had the *Watchmen* previously. The reading was interspersed with small group discussion that, after time, morphed into a full class discussion that filled the rest of our time that day. Each section had many students who verbally shared their own connection to what they felt was Barry's point: Education can sometimes get in the way of a student's passion for an activity. This point felt important to each class. A few weeks before the end of the semester, in Week 13, I asked students to take the post-reading survey. I waited until Week 13 to see specifically whether time away from the piece and our discussions would offer a different insight into students' thoughts about the comic text, but also wanted to ask for the survey responses before our final exam week (Week 16). Again, I asked the survey responses be anonymous in efforts to continue an air of safety, free of reprisal,

without grade, status, or label considerations hanging on the student responses. And, as with all of the previous surveys from the previous study or this one, responding to the survey was optional. Once again, not every student in attendance that day for each section responded, which provided 26 post-reading responses. It may be important to note that I have no way of knowing whether the 26 respondents from the pre-reading survey are the same 26 respondents from the post-reading survey as I wasn't trying to pair each student's pre- and post-reading responses together.

These survey questions, once again, did not clearly spell out my own research question: "Are people still stigmatizing comic texts, in a contemporary academic context, or feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner?" However, the context of the entire class from Week 1 through the end of the course gave students much more insight this time into the reason I was asking for their survey responses and likely a much better understanding and engagement with stigma than the study from Chapter 3. Did this possibly have an effect on the student responses? Of course. I've asserted previously in this dissertation that I do not believe there to be a value-free system. I realize many of my colleagues may disagree with that statement and may feel it a matter for debate. In other forums, it likely is being debated and rightly should be. Yet, here, in this dissertation, I hold to that belief. How I handled the research, including the pedagogy I chose to improve, undoubtedly had impact on the experience.

The post-reading survey presented the following questions:

1. Now that we've read Lynda Barry's "Two Questions" what are your thoughts about it?
2. What do you think about using cartoons or comics like this in our college course after reading one?
3. Did you find that you did or didn't read, engage, or enjoy the piece— even understand

the piece— because of it being a cartoon or comic text?

4. Do you give me permission to use the responses on this paper anonymously in my own writing, research and/or conference presentations?

As explained in Chapter 3, in asking pre- and post-reading survey questions that didn't specifically spell out my own research question, I expected to find a variety of answers that would allow some insight through analysis as to whether the students may be showing signs of stigma with the use of the comic text in class. At this point in the study from the previous chapter, I began to see some manner of disconnect between the survey responses and student actions in the class. As such, I was interested to see whether any form of disconnect would occur once again or if the students' engagement from class would carry over to their post-reading survey responses. And, to be quite truthful, my inner child, still standing at the red comic rack of my youth, was waiting to see if I had done better and learned from my mistakes or if I was still being too much like the bad guys of my past.

Will There Be Disconnect?

The pre-reading surveys shared a great deal of interesting commentary. Based on the variety of comments that were shared in the pre-reading survey responses, it seems like a majority of the students had previous experiences of some type with comic texts based on their responses. I was not expecting this in any way and found it quite surprising. The responses to each of the first three questions have been broken down in the following table. There were 26 pre-reading responses returned to me with permission to share any findings. From those 26 responses the following table breaks down the responses to each of the first three questions into variations of have or haven't read comic texts or have had positive or negative experiences with

comic texts and so on. It is quite possible for there to still be questions in terms of authenticity or disconnect, but for the life of me, I didn't see any issues at the time and haven't stumbled upon any issues since then during my reflections.

Table 3
Pre-Reading Responses for Lynda Barry Comic Text

Category	Number of Students
Read other comic texts.	20
Haven't read other comic texts.	6
Using comic texts in college would be a positive experience.	19
Using comic texts in college would be a negative experience.	4
Added comments about positive experiences with comic texts.	15
Added comments about negative experiences with comic texts.	4

First, the pre-reading surveys shared very clearly that none of the students had read any of Lynda Barry's work. Even as an avid comic text reader, I hadn't been privy to Barry's work until finding her "Two Questions" piece in a textbook I was considering for a course. As such, it didn't surprise me that students hadn't engaged with Barry's work previously. However, 20 of the 26 responses shared that students had read some variation of comic texts. These responses pointed toward two comic texts in particular more than others: Comic strips from a newspaper and/or comic books. There were many threads of response that shared some version of narratives explaining the student(s) had read comic texts as a child but had drifted away from them as they got older because they couldn't find the time to read anymore. I wrestled with that quite a bit. What made it such that so many students claimed they couldn't find time to read anymore? It is likely students find time for television, hobbies, family and friends, even social media updates. So why not find time for reading? There may be interesting personal and cultural impact here

for future research.

Another fairly common set of threads in the pre-reading responses were that comic texts would provide opportunities that could be complex, but at the same time fun, exciting, more creative, and helpful. While this set of threads was shared on many responses, the more negatively framed responses offered their own insight as well. Nearly a handful of responses, four total, offered some sort of critique against comic texts. These responses clearly stated some version of dialogue that said they felt readers won't learn anything from comics or that comic texts are unprofessional. I'm not sure the reason for these responses but appreciate them just as much as all of the other responses in this study. While I can't speak on exactly why the students who did read comic texts once had stopped reading them, beyond the repeated responses of having no time to do so, there was one response that gave me reason to pause. One student shared that he had used to read comic books for silent sustained reading (SSR) sessions in a high school class until the teacher said that comics weren't up to the academic standards needed for SSR. That response took me back to the narrative I shared in opening Chapter 2. I felt an echo of, "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" It may be the clearest stigma oriented response, even though it points toward the experiencing of another person's stigma, specifically the past teacher, and doesn't offer insight to if that teacher's stigma was built from contemporary stigma creation or historic stigma experience. Interestingly, my mind raced to labeling that teacher as one of the bad guys, although he or she likely felt they were in the right to hold such an opinion and share it with students as the hero. Then again, I still feel that good and bad, heroes and villains, are all too often still murky.

The post-reading surveys also shared a variety of insightful commentary. As mentioned, there were 26 post-reading responses returned to me with permission to share any findings.

From those 26 responses, the following table breaks down the responses to each of the first three questions into variations of positive and negative responses.

Table 4
Post-Reading Responses for Lynda Barry Comic Text

CATEGORY	Number of Students
After reading, thoughts on Barry's piece: Positive.	24
After reading, thoughts on Barry's piece: Negative.	2
After reading, comic texts in college class: Positive.	25
After reading, comic texts in college class: Negative.	1
Style of piece had an impact on engagement, etc.: Positive.	24
Style of piece had an impact on engagement, etc.: Negative.	2

The response to the post-reading survey were overwhelmingly positive upon initial consideration. The responses found the message in Barry's comic text deeply moving and complex. The issue that Barry wrestled with in the piece stems from the piece's title, "Two Questions" and what those two questions turned out to be, some version of asking if one's work is good or does it "suck." This seemed important to the students as their responses often shared some consideration that the comic text made them feel as if Barry understood the issues they are facing with their own work and in their own lives. It may sound strange, but the responses here had a profound impact on my thoughts. At first, I felt like a child again, on those rare days when mom said we had enough money to buy a comic book. I don't know if I felt more like I was floating or more like I was flying. Then, as I started to calm myself, I found myself wondering why I was surprised and excited by the survey responses. In short, I realized I was terribly worried another form of disconnect may occur, and the engagement I witnessed in the classroom wouldn't show up on the post-reading survey responses. I was thrilled when it did. Is it

academically appropriate to get excited by our findings? Is excitement what the good guys or bad guys do? I wonder even now, do other people get excited when they engage with their research like this or are many people coached to strive for a more professional distance?

To clarify again, I do not feel there was any form of disconnect in this study. If such disconnect did occur in some manner, it was in a manner that I am unable to recognize currently. On the pre-reading survey, a large portion of students responded they had read some sort of comic texts previously and were open or excited to read one again in our class. On the post-reading survey, a similarly large portion of students found the reading experience to be something positive. I strongly believe the younger me, standing in the market reading comics, would be excited about this.

For the pre-reading survey, a small number of students didn't anticipate enjoying the comic text in class. This showed again in the post-reading survey when a similar small number of students experienced the reading of the comic text in class to be something negative. And yet, once again, I find myself wanting to add something from the classroom experience that showed student actions in connection to the comic text that stand out as integral but apart from the pre- and post-reading surveys. I explained earlier in this chapter that the English 111 course in which I was conducting this study had a thematic focus on problematizing the complexities of adult learning. The normative assignment for the course is a multi-source, argumentative synthesis essay that is worth a third (or more) of the students' overall grades. In the two sections of the course I taught and conducted this research study, 17 students incorporated the Barry comic text into their essay as one of the sources they were synthesizing. This seems important because it shows engagement beyond choosing to respond on the pre- or post-reading surveys. However, since not every student chose to take part in the pre- or post-reading surveys, I have no way of

knowing whether the 17 students who used the comic text in their essays were students who responded on either of the surveys. It's a riddle I won't be able to puzzle out. Still, the point that the reading garnered such use speaks to me of engagement.

Reflection

At one point, my own position on comic text stigma was moving to a place wherein I wondered whether stigma was alive only because those of us who had experienced it previously were dragging it into the present with us. That consideration led me to frame a research question that asked if comic text stigmatization was still occurring, "Are people still stigmatizing comic texts, in a contemporary academic context, or feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner?" However, I wanted to ensure that a student's general dislike of reading didn't get misappropriated as a stigma toward comic text. I'd like to consider that for a moment. Previously in this chapter, I shared that during discussion leading up to the pre-reading survey many students shared they didn't read for fun anymore. Some of them remembered reading for fun when they were children, but the enjoyment for reading was something they lost as they grew older. Not every student experienced that, but a many claimed to have feelings akin to that. Yet, there were also students who kept their love of reading alive and well as and after they grew older. What I think is important is to recognize is that if a student doesn't like to read much of anything, his or her response to a survey question about reading comic texts may be easily misinterpreted. Asking students if they read comic texts without also wondering about their other reading habits may provide responses that are misappropriated without fully understanding the context of the student and their reading habits or choices.

Consider John from the personal narrative I shared at the beginning of Chapter 2. John

struggled to get a passing grade in both English classes where I was his teacher and failed multiple English classes during his middle school and high school years. When asked about reading, John would often reply with some version of, "It ain't my thing." Yet he liked to read comic texts. What I feel is important to point out is this: What if John hadn't liked reading comic texts? If I conducted a survey and asked John whether he liked reading comic texts and he shared, "It ain't my thing," I could mislabel a stigma of comic texts that would actually have better been labeled a dislike of reading. That is an important point in the larger academic discussion on comic texts. If students do not like to read any type of text, we should be very careful not to frame that as a stigma toward comic texts.

What we should be vigilant about in our comic text discussions is uncovering any commentary that more aptly point specifically toward comic text stigma. In Chapter 2 I shared the question asked by the superintendent: "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" Commentary like this points a more direct line toward stigma than some of our more anecdotal experiences. That isn't to say those anecdotal experiences aren't important, but the line toward stigma may not always be as clear. This is why I felt it very important to single out the point one student shared on the pre-reading survey about his or her teacher not allowing comic texts for SSR because they weren't academically appropriate. That seems a rather direct connection to stigma. However, not all indicants will be as clear. I imagine taking the pre- and post-reading surveys myself as a young college student. What buy-in would I have given the surveys? Would I have shared my experiences in detail or would I have summarized them in a manner that could be misinterpreted or casually passed over? I'm not sure. However, based on the different approaches to engaging with the comic texts as shown in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I can speculate that I'd be more open to sharing a version of the truth in

the classroom environment of Chapter 4 because it was engaged with better methodologies in mind.

Previously in this chapter, I shared that 17 students who may or may not have engaged in this study through the voluntary surveys went beyond the discussion of stigma considered herein and incorporated the Barry comic text used in the study in the synthesis essay crafted during the second half of our semester. Again, the synthesis essay is a large component of their competency assessment and is at least a third of their overall grade. That action, their use of the comic text in their synthesis essays, seemed to battle the previous disconnect noted in Chapter 3 between student survey responses and student actions. However, I would like to offer another interesting brush stroke to the picture the survey responses and comic text use is painting here. In the post-reading surveys there was a small number of students who said in some way or another that the Barry comic text fit perfectly with the point they were making in their essays, but they chose not to use it. Sadly, none of those responses shared why they had chosen not to use the piece. That point, that the comic text fit with the issue they were writing about and they chose not to use it, *might* be an element of stigma. Yet, I hesitate to make the claim in full since students didn't share an explanation of their choices in not referencing the Barry piece in their writing. They didn't share why they avoided using it in their essays.

Early, during the framing of this dissertation, two colleagues asked if perhaps I would want to interview students after the surveys were completed. I had chosen not to do that. However, I can see now the opportunity that would have afforded me in clarifying issues like this. My regret is that too often in my life, asking questions that were deeply personal, intense, or made people uncomfortable led to me being cast in the light of the villain. I didn't want to see that again with my students. It would be like casting myself in the role of the Riddler, asking

students to "Riddle me this" and then expecting some clarity in their answer to: "Why didn't you use the Barry piece in your synthesis writing?" It's rather strange, all of these years later, and I'm still not sure why asking questions often seems related to the role of the bad guy for some people. At the end of Chapter 3, I shared my thoughts that stigma itself seems a unique, personal topic and likely has unique personal reasons. I find once again that those reasons may be an interesting consideration for my future research.

In this study, I believe that I was able to get students to open up about some of their personal stigmas by sharing stories of stigmas that my family or I experienced. I could share my mother's feeling of stigma at being too old to be a college student, or my experiences of stigma with the label of coming from a broken home. Yet, it seems like the people who best understood those stigmas may have been people who have felt them personally as well. Perhaps it is hard for students who don't read, either comic texts or any text, to speak about feeling stigma toward something they once enjoyed if they are now people crafting stigma? For now, I offer the Burkean parlor the experience of this study to add another layer of consideration to the discussion of comic text use. Once again, as with the previous chapter, I cannot say without doubt that this study offers clear proof of stigma toward comic text. However, unlike the previous study from Chapter 3, I experienced no struggle in getting these students to engage in reading and discussing a comic text in our course. It's also important to remember many students went beyond that reading and discussion to actually use Barry's comic text in their own essays. However, my own interest is piqued by the students who shared how well it would have fit, but they chose not to use it. A ten-year-old me is spinning the comic rack in my mind wondering why.

Once again, I am left feeling this study may add something interesting when dealing with

this question of stigma. However, much like Barry shares in her comic text, I sit back and consider all of the responses and actions I've witnessed in the collection of the pre- and post-reading surveys for Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, as well as the various discussions and actions of my students, and I wonder whether this is good or does it suck. However, unlike the previous chapter, I am left with a much stronger feeling of purpose with this chapter. I believe the results from this research can promote the idea that if there is still a stigma with comic text, like the SSR teacher's comments about inappropriateness lead me to believe, it can be battled with effective comic text use and effective pedagogy that engages students.

CHAPTER 5: Students, Teaching, Research, and Comic Texts

One of the comics that interested me as a young reader was Marvel's "What If" title. This comic was founded on the premise of asking "What If" this strange, unexpected, or random thing had occurred instead of the other outcome. The very first issue of "What If" asked what it might have been like if Spider-Man had joined the Fantastic Four. Since that first issue, there have been many creative considerations wrestled with in the pages of "What If". This basic question of "what if" is something I've long battled as a comic text reader, as a student, as a teacher, and so on. As such, when I reflect back on the experience of this dissertation, I find myself often asking myself "what if" in regards to different elements. It's a small irony that for so much of my life asking questions like this painted me in the light of the bad guy. What if the superintendent in my Chapter 2 narrative heard John and me casually discussing *Watchmen* in class? What if the secretary wasn't paying such close attention to the invoices the day she became offended by some of the titles listed on it? What if what made the heroes and villains fit in those roles was clear and discernable?

When I consider the ideas or I suppose even the random thoughts that I wrestled with during the research and writing of this dissertation, I feel as if there were many things I took from this process that aren't easily showing up in the black and white print of each page. What if I could somehow share them anyway? There are various threads of thoughts and reflections that have played an important role in the mental wrestling match that have been a key element to the crafting of each chapter, both while writing and while thinking about writing during revisions. While the threads sometimes seem quite different and aimed toward their own direction, there are familiar elements in each that craft a similar tale. In short, I think this dissertation reminded me of something very unique and important about students I had somehow forgotten. Yet, in a

different light and perhaps different perspective, it also reminded me of something that is integral to teaching itself. Finally, it taught me quite a bit more than I ever thought to expect about conducting, considering, and understanding research. A casual reader might look at these areas and say that they seem to obviously go hand-in-hand, almost something akin to the cliché of birds of a feather flock together. However, what I learned about each area also allowed me to make a statement that is better suited to the complex academic conversation taking place in Burke's parlor, since the research and experiences of this dissertation have combined to form something new, and likely just a bit different, for what I'd like to add to the discussion of comic text.

What I Learned About Students

When it comes to considering the students who are part of the foundation of this dissertation, there are a number of different considerations I take from this experience. First, when I reflect back to the experiences I shared in Chapter 2 and the book banning event, I realized how clearly evident it was that most students have to be engaged with what they are reading to truly and personally value it. Take John as an example. John loved the *Watchmen* (1987) comic text. We engaged in a rather complex discussion about the piece and some of the finer points of the plot, character development, and so on. However, he struggled through and failed multiple English classes because he claimed he didn't like reading. The thoughts I initially had when I considered John and his complex engagement with the *Watchmen* (1987) was that he was actually a strong reader if he found a route to engage with the material. However, I missed something during my first consideration of the discussion John and I had. John said he didn't like reading. Yet, he read and engaged with graphic novels very well. Do you see what I missed

originally? For John to state openly he didn't like reading, what if he hadn't considered his time spent with graphic novels as reading? That feels a rather important "what if" to consider. It may even be that John considered reading as something forced, academic, graded, or a number of other elements. Yet, graphic novels were somehow different than that for him. Thus, I wonder "what if" John had been able to engage with comic texts more often in his English classes. Doesn't it seem more likely that John would have found a route to engage with the reading? Cambourne (2000) shared the need for the conditions of learning to be met for learning to occur and engagement is one of those conditions. This makes me wonder: What if John hasn't found a way to engage with other non-comic texts or that his educational experience has been one where engagement wasn't a key part of the classrooms he was in? And when I think about John, I find myself wondering whether other students may be battling very similar issues with stigma as well. Robinson (2010) shared that for many students, what's happening in their classrooms is quite boring and not engaging and that students are in various ways being penalized for being unengaged. This seems likely to be something that happened to John. Yet, John had done something that not many of my other students had done, especially those from Chapter 3. He found engagement in comic texts that was lacking for him elsewhere. What if he were allowed a forum for that interest?

The students in Chapter 3 showed tendencies much different than John did in Chapter 2. While John found engagement in comic text, he avoided non-comic texts. Most of the students in Chapter 2 engaged with the non-comic texts in the course, particularly the Howard Zinn text, but avoided the *Watchmen* (1987) comic text. In comparison with John's reading choices, this shows opposing ends of the spectrum. What if my poor pedagogical approach caused that? When adding into the mix the students from Chapter 4 who read and discussed the Barry (2004)

comic text, we see more variations of engagement along the spectrum. Most students in Chapter 4 read and discussed Barry's piece during our in-class reading, but not all of them engaged with it at what they considered a complex level. Meanwhile, other students engaged with the piece at a reflective enough depth that they carried the meaning they made forward as evidenced by their use of the piece in their synthesis writing for our class and the comments they made in course discussions that followed later in the semester. Still, none of this clearly points to proof or absence of stigma since it could imply a number of other reasons for reading or avoiding, engaging or disengaging, even liking or disliking comic (or other) texts. What this does, however, is highlight an important question about students that seems both obvious and important: What if engaging students is so very complex due to their different experiences, different tastes, and different approaches to various texts when combined with the manner in which we teach the texts? That might begin to gain a foothold on the complexity faced in the classroom. Yet, is that something we value enough in all arenas of education to allow for variation based on student interests—at all schools—and in all classrooms with various artifact genres and artifacts such as comic texts? I'm not convinced the answer is yes.

What I Learned About Teaching

A few years ago, I was the recipient of a gift from a past student. The student gave me a baseball cap with a university's logo on it. There was a card with the cap that explained the student had never thought that he would go to a "big college" but he had been accepted and was transferring to the college associated with the cap. However, the card added that he learned to think differently about himself during our classes together. The card went on and shared a bit about his transformational experience. While that was deeply powerful and moving for me, for

purposes here I want to go back to the cap. I adjusted the cap to the largest size setting available and attempted to put it on. However, as often happens when my head and caps like this meet, it didn't fit. Yes, it's rather humorous that my enormous dome doesn't allow many caps to fit. Yet, and here's why I share this event, there was a small tag inside the cap that read, "One size fits all." For me, at least, I was left asking, "What if" one size doesn't fit all?

What this dissertation has reminded me about teaching is that it is quite important to remember that one size does not fit all. At best, it seems better to consider that one size fits some but likely not all. Luckily, some caps even acknowledge that with their own tags, "One size fits most." How is it those cap makers seem to see this clearer than some educators? As a rather new teacher in a high-school classroom, I hadn't yet considered trying to get my students who were struggling with course materials to engage with different readings by changing the curriculum. As Chapter 2 shared, I understand the value of giving students a variety of things to read and engage with. However, none of that was graded or assessed beyond casual conversations. The reading they did for enjoyment wasn't part of our curriculum. Our courses had a defined curriculum with expected readings. We were going to read *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* because it was part of the curriculum, not because it was particularly interesting or engaging to our students. As a teacher, I would try to make it engaging, but realize in retrospect that the best I was able to do was find that "one size fits some" with my attempt at helping students engage with the piece. What I didn't do back then was challenge the curriculum. I didn't question why the curriculum had to be based on specific readings instead of engaging students with more choice in readings. This is something that I now realize I've carried into my college classrooms. I don't always ask students what they'd like to read in our course. Instead, I've asked them to read things my department and colleagues have come to expect due to the

needs of the curriculum and the course outcomes, instead of the needs of the students trying to learn. It's something I'll work on moving forward. What if we could find a better way?

The framework of my first action research project, discussed in Chapter 3, could have likely failed due to teaching choices I made. I asked students to begin reading the *Watchmen* (1987) at home. As that chapter pointed out, they didn't respond by doing the reading. As I reflect now, I ask "what if" I would have started the reading together in class, got them into the text more fully, even asked them questions about their aesthetic response to the comic text, it may have worked to jumpstart their reading and interests. I regret that I didn't start in a way that got students reading the text together in class. Yes, the students' reluctance to read the comic text, when compared to their reading of the other non-comic texts in that course, could point toward some type of stigma. However, if my teaching had been more directed at *immersing* students in the genre, another of Camborne's (2000) learning conditions, they may have carried momentum into their reading at home. That reflection is what led me to teaching the Barry (2004) comic text differently in the Chapter 4 study. It was really a simple question that made all the difference: What if I taught the comic text better? That's a question worthy of good classrooms. Somewhere, or more appropriately some *when*, I'd wager a young me is standing at red comic rack in the local market nodding in approval.

After experiencing the reluctance students had with reading the *Watchmen* (1987) in Chapter 3, I made the decision to teach the Barry (2004) comic text differently. That's what led me to previewing the article, its importance and connections to what we were doing in class, and then moving straight into having students do the reading in small groups with each other. I'm not much of a fisherman but it seems like after baiting the hook, you'd need to get it into the water. It's a rather simple concept. I would ask myself questions like: What if I had waited too

long after previewing the *Watchmen* (1987) so that students may have lost momentum. The bait, I suppose, had withered. That's what I did differently with the Barry (2004) comic text. Right after previewing it, we read. That might seem like a small, even obvious, change. Yet, what if—and I want to emphasize once again how important that question can be—there was potential stigma but effective teaching could likely battle it? I'd like to clarify that point even more. I believe that regardless of what the stigma might be—a stigma of comic texts; a stigma of reading in general; a stigma of engaging with course material; a stigma of education or the classroom—effective teaching could battle the stigma. I hadn't considered that before reflecting during this dissertation. Yes, I was looking in a different direction and seeking answers to a different question. Remember, my research question was, "Are people still stigmatizing comic texts, in a contemporary academic context, or feel that comic texts are being stigmatized in some manner?" Yet, "what if" I found an answer to a question I wasn't looking for: "Would effective teaching lessen the impact of stigma, if it exists, in the classroom?" Yes. Yes, I believe it most definitely would.

The different ways I taught the two comic texts in my classrooms shows to me, rather clearly, that if—and I mean that again with special emphasis on *if*—there was some type of cultural stigma against comic text, effective teaching could battle it. I feel the differences between the action research studies in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, when framed specifically by the different teaching choices I made, show this to be true. In another way, this also says that if there was stigma directed at reading comic texts in a classroom, effective teaching might mask the stigma. As Cambourne (2000) implied, immersion and engagement are two powerful agents in a learning situation. Yet, another of his conditions of learning, approximation, was also evident since, as Chapter 4 showed, many students included Barry (2004) as a resource in their

own writings in the course. So what does it mean that when asking a question about comic texts, I learned something about teaching? Well, for me, it shows the unexpected opportunity and impact that can occur during research if we're open to it.

What I Learned about Research

There is something to be said about the process of crafting research that is different than conducting research and reflecting back on research during analysis and revision. The research in this dissertation took me on a journey, which I fully hoped for and at some levels even expected. However, it ended up in a place that utterly surprised me. As I consider the research framework I chose, I see how teaching choices added an additional perspective on my research that I hadn't specifically found a way to consider in terms of their influence in the research. Originally, this was one of the driving foundations that caused me to choose action research as the close connection between teaching and research is at the heart of action research, and in reflection it feels as if both were served well in this process.

I was trying to limit my influence on the research, especially in ways that left me feeling like a bad guy manipulating students since I believed I would be influencing the research by being a part of it, in a way that ended up not being beneficial to the original research question. For instance, when I considered the research project in Chapter 3, I had students do the pre-reading survey during the first week of the course. I also highlighted in the framework that these were anonymous, optional, and ungraded. While my intentions were to try not influence the student responses, I now fully understand the possible scope of influence that I could not control. I could have unintentionally influenced students by using optional and ungraded, if they interpreted those to also imply unimportant. Yet, "what if" I was more focused on effective

teaching than potential influence? I believe now that if my approach would have been more methodologically sound, more students would have engaged with *Watchmen* in Chapter 3, stigma or not.

A rather clear example of this could be the difference in how students in the two chapters were asked to engage the comic texts. In Chapter 3, we talked about the comic text in class, and they were sent home to read it. Yet, in Chapter 4 students were asked to read together, in class, right away. These teaching choices likely had strong influence on students' buy-in to the comic text's academic credibility. Given the experiences of Chapter 3, I decided to revise the timing of the pre- and post-surveys in the classroom as well as when and where the reading should happen. It leads me to this very important lesson: The choices we make during the framing of our research will have a very important effect on what the research inevitably does or doesn't tell us. I see this quite clearly when reflecting on thoughts like "what if" I had taught the *Watchmen* better in Chapter 3.

After doing the pre-reading survey in Chapter 3 at the beginning of the semester and the post-reading survey at the end of the semester, I moved both survey responses for Chapter 4 much closer to the actual reading of the comic text. Reflecting on the process showed me that the elements from Chapter 3, the pre-reading survey, the actual reading itself, and the post-reading survey were much too far apart. They felt, upon completion, disconnected from each other. In Chapter 3, I said that there appeared to be some form of disconnect between student responses on the surveys and student actions in the class. Yet, with the large time between each element, I'm left wondering "what if" the form of disconnect was actually in the research framework. There are other influences my framework couldn't adequately gauge. The students in Chapter 3 were asked to read the *Watchmen* (1987) during a time when many of them may

have been taking midterm exams and then responding to the post-reading survey during final-exam week. What if these things influenced their responses, their buy-in to the process? Doesn't it seem quite possible? Yet, my research didn't account for the timing in Chapter 3. That's why I moved the survey responses in Chapter 4 to avoid midterm and final-exam stressors that may have happened in the previous survey.

Still, there is much more that I've learned about research than the framework, timing, choices, and such. Perhaps the most important thing I've come to learn about research is this: Failure in research is okay. Some days we'll ride to the market and leave before finding a new comic to excite us. That's okay. Can I, without pause, doubt, or reservation, say that some cultural stigma of comic text does or doesn't exist in contemporary classrooms? I wouldn't say it with confidence. So in that aspect, my research didn't do what I set out to do. I can't add an all-encompassing answer to Burke's parlor. Yet, my research has taught me this: *if* stigma does exist, it's likely at an individual level that would be difficult to unravel with confidence and precision since it would be easy to misinterpret multiple factors—e.g., an avoidance of reading; a complex, busy schedule; pressures of getting other assignments done—as stigma. Again, I may have not been successful with that inquiry, but that doesn't mean I didn't learn something from conducting it. And yet, I still feel that the revisions made between the conducting of research for Chapters 3 and Chapter 4 gives special insight to teaching that is useful in this thread of discussion: *if* stigma did exist, effective teaching offers a strong counter for it. For whatever reasons, that last sentence resonates powerfully with the comic text reader inside of me. What if more of my own teachers and colleagues had felt that way and carried that belief? In some research frameworks, the roles or moves of teacher and researcher may not work together cohesively. However, in action research it would be the teacher moves, good or bad I suppose,

that drive the research and help us learn. This is another instance of ambiguity between good and evil since we could learn from both the good and bad moves in the classroom.

What I Learned about Comic Texts

I shared the story about the baseball cap gift from a previous student and the "one size fits all" fallacy earlier, but I think the same thing can be shared as applicable here. Comic texts do have a fan base. That select group of people, which I feel a part of, seem fiercely loyal to their particular reading genre. However, I've learned something rather simple that should be a key element to the discussion regarding comic text stigma: People can dislike comic texts out of style and taste without stigmatizing them. Embarrassingly, I hadn't considered that a reason many students may not read comic texts is that they simply don't enjoy the particulars of comic text. It feels obvious reflecting on in now. Personally, I dislike horror movies, wine, sushi, and country music; the list could go on. Yet, it doesn't mean I don't see value in those things. They simply aren't my taste or style, but I don't believe I am stigmatizing them by disliking them. So much of the conversation around comic text stigma points toward people—like the superintendent from Chapter 2—who do seem to be stigmatizing comic text that we may fall victim to the claim that everyone who doesn't read comic text is avoiding them because of a cultural stigma. And I realize now that simply doesn't have to be the case. Furthermore, I don't believe that's the point any longer.

What I learned about comic texts might be this: If the right comic texts are paired with the right readers, at the right times, and engaged with good teaching practices, then good things can happen. The same is true if the situation were reversed. Give the wrong comic text to the

wrong reader at the wrong time, and complicate the situation with poor pedagogy, and no connection is made. As a proponent of using comic texts in the classroom, even I admit some comic texts aren't that good. Yet, I don't judge the entire genre by those things I feel are low quality. Maybe that's the key difference in stigmatizing the genre or not. It's as if those people who are stigmatizing comic texts are holding all variations of style, quality, and form to be equal to the pieces they feel are of lowest quality. What if they had never been offered the opportunity to realize the difference?

Recently, the owner the local comic shop in my area gave me a copy of a comic text that he was thinking of using as the reading for the monthly graphic novel club. It was a copy of the first trade paperback volume of *The Superior Foes of Spider-Man*. I read the piece and shared with him that it was horrible. The art was of poor quality. The story quality was very poor and filled with holes. It was a complete mess of slapstick frivolousness from cover-to-cover. I saw no intellectual conversation stemming from such a weak piece of comic text. It occurred to me that it would be difficult to champion what I believed to be a very low quality, weak piece of comic text if I were challenged to use that one piece as a symbol for all comic texts. What if that was the only level of comic text some people, like the superintendent from Chapter 2, ever came in contact with? It occurred to me that when I speak of comic text, I too have pieces that I feel won't work for in-depth, intellectual conversation. Yet, that doesn't mean I'm stigmatizing all comic texts. Yet, if my only experience with comic texts had been artifacts like the one I was asked to consider and found lacking in the first trade paperback volume of *The Superior Foes of Spider-Man*? I could fall into the trap of judging the entire genre by the pieces I'd encountered. Without making excuses for those people who hold a negative approach to *all* comic text use, I feel like I finally understand how they may have arrived at their position. To battle this, I think

we would need continued engagement of students with complex comic text to offset the consideration of frivolousness. However, if the students don't end up loving comic texts, *that's okay*.

When I use comic texts in my college courses moving forward, my goal won't be to make every student into a comic aficionado or collector. My goal will be to share with students another possible genre that might help them engage with and consider whatever complex concept we are wrestling with in our class. At the same time, I'll still be trying to avoid having students feel like the only reason we're considering comic text is because they are community college students and the misapplied notion that comic texts are easier than other forms or genres we could use.

Lastly, in regards to comic texts, I also never considered the difference density of complexity some comic texts offer. After conducting the studies in Chapter 3 and 4, a colleague commented that the two comic texts used seemed quite different. My colleague pointed out that even as a comic text reader, the *Watchmen* offered a sort of density in the text that challenged her. Barry's "Two Questions" was complex, engaging, and quite stimulating, but had a different engagement, in terms of density, than the *Watchmen* piece did. This was an important consideration for me. I hadn't considered the different cost to engaging with each comic text. Thus, while I feel much of the student disconnect that was felt in Chapter 3 was likely due to my poor teaching of the comic text, the point my colleague made was important: The *Watchmen* was a quite harder text to engage with, even for experienced comic readers. What if I would have used a comic text that was just as complex intellectually as *Watchmen*, but not as difficult for students to get through in the study for Chapter 3? Perhaps the outcome would have been different. What if I would have chosen a different text and also taught it more effectively? It's

rather interesting where these "What If" questions can lead.

Wrestling with Realizations: Birdman and Archie

Quite recently, I watched an Oscar nominated film starring Michael Keaton called *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. To add some context to the movie, I'll share that Keaton was the actor who played the roles of Batman and Bruce Wayne in the first widely accepted Batman movie in the late 1980s. He also played the same role in the first sequel in the Batman franchise that followed a few years later. Then, he left the role. That knowledge adds something important to a viewing of "Birdman." This was a movie that very early, and repeatedly, mocked superhero films and the people involved with them. Keaton's character of "Birdman" would often do voice-overs in his mind that utilized a deepened, dark superhero voice, reminiscent of the voice he used as Batman years ago. He even mocked doing ongoing franchised sequels of superhero films in Birdman. He was ridiculed for leather hero garb, shallow plot points and dialogue, an overall lacking of development, as well as a slew of "it's-not-artistic" related put downs that were a driving factor in "Birdman's" development. For reasons deeply rooted with this dissertation and my childhood experiences, I loathed the movie.

The movie *Birdman* shows the issues associated with stigma in comic texts considered in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. The ongoing punch line in the movie is that Keaton's "actor" character doesn't have talent because he was in the superhero movie. Not only doesn't he have talent, but it's claimed during the movie that his future endeavors, like the play he is working on during the movie, won't be talented or successful either. His narrative voice-overs even imply that he should "sell-out" and go back to the superhero genre and make another financial success, even if it isn't accepted as something artistic. It is either subtly implying or out-rightly claiming

that the stereotypical things shared in the first chapter of this dissertation are felt throughout the movie industry. While it is sharing the stigma of the superhero genre action movie instead of the stigma of comic text, I feel there is enough of a relationship between the two to see the loose connection and comparison of the genres since they both deal with the same archetypal framework. Superhero movies quite often stem from comic texts. Thus, in saying the plot, characters, storylines, or complexity, is lacking in a one form of the story—like the movie—it may lead people to assume it is lacking in the other forms as well (e.g., the comic text version). This is speculative, granted. However, in this particular film, the main thematic element reads like a detailed critique of why the superhero genre is stigmatized. It reinforced for me the gradual epiphany I had while working on this dissertation: There is more to consider about this issue than a yes or no approach to stigma in contextualizing the comic text issue. What if one possible consideration is that *some* comic texts are frivolous, infantilizing, or filled with sex and gore, but not *all* of them are that way? Another approach to this line of thought is this: What if *many* comic texts are worthy of a place in serious academic conversations, but again, not *all* of them are this way. It is with this consideration that I start to embarrassingly consider my own hypocrisy of judgment.

Recently, a colleague sent me a link to an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. It was an op-ed piece by Bart Beaty (2015) titled "Taking Comics Seriously." In the article, Beaty discussed the strange experience of working with comics in higher education, let alone focusing on them for research. Much of Beaty's work that is considered in the piece focuses on the comic text *Archie* and the multiple spin-off titles, such as *Betty and Veronica*, which originated from its pages. When I read the piece, I found myself nodding along with many of the experiences Beaty has had in considering comic text in this educational research framework.

Without explicitly stating it, Beaty offered a look at some of the stigma associated with the comic text genre akin to those I shared in the personal narrative beginning Chapter 2. However, and this both surprised and confused me, I found myself thinking, "*Archie*? Really?" I've read a handful of *Archie* comics and can't remember much of anything that would strike me as academically rigorous. This is something interesting to add into the consideration of context though. *Archie* is one of the comic texts I feel detractors would throw words like "frivolous" at. Yet, Beaty found a way in which to engage the title in academically complex means. It has me thinking, again, that the right person paired with the right text can lead to uniquely special outcomes.

Beaty helped me to repurpose the framing of the considerations I'm leaving this dissertation still wrestling with. Just because a comic text may seem frivolous to some, doesn't mean it's frivolous to all. I'm embarrassed that it has taken me this far to uncover that realization, yet the realization still feels importantly profound. Who am I, or who are any of us, to say a particular genre or text doesn't have academic merit, instead of clarifying that the genre doesn't have academic merit to *me* or to *us* at this point? The realization is important because it brings a new offering of responses to questions like the superintendent's from Chapter 2: "What kind of idiot would have high school kids reading comic strips in class?" What we may likely be implying is we haven't yet found academic merit ourselves and assuming that since we haven't found the merit, it doesn't exist. That's the misstep I made when reading Beaty's article and thinking, "*Archie*? Really?" Yet, that doesn't mean someone else, a colleague or a student, couldn't do better and help us see the merit they might uncover.

This feels so very similar to the issues I battled standing in front of that squeaky, red metal rack in the market so many years ago. Just because my step-father didn't find a use or any

engagement in the comic texts I was reading, it didn't mean I wasn't finding use and engagement. What if my step-father, a slew of my teachers, and later colleagues, would have realized that all those years ago? And if we look for the merit other people do or don't uncover, we might learn more from listening to their experiences with texts, stigma, research, learning, and teaching. This, more than anything else, was an important statement that sprung from this dissertation for consideration in Burke's parlor.

Looking Forward

Previously, I said that failure in research was okay. As I look forward, I'd like to clarify that statement a bit more fully. When I set out to conduct the research for the chapters in this dissertation, I was focused on doing a few different things: First, I was focused on seeing whether a stigma could be identified in using comic texts in courses I teach. In this part of my focus, I see semblances of failure. I don't feel the research conducted can unequivocally claim a clear answer to that question. Second, I chose to use action research to see what I could learn about research, students, and teaching. In this part of my focus, there will be only failure if I don't implement what I've learned about these elements into *my own* pedagogical approach and share what I've learned with the Burkean parlor. As such, I'd like to close this chapter and dissertation by offering reflections on three final areas: 1) How my teaching will change based on this experience, 2) What plans I have for future research based on this experience, and 3) How this research has made a difference at the community college at which I teach.

My teaching has most assuredly changed due to this experience. When I finally saw the impact of having students read together in small groups after beginning with discussion, instead of reading on their own outside of class, I began implementing more collaborative work and

assignments in all of the courses I teach. For instance, in my online courses, I've incorporated a number of small group review/discussion activities. However, when I teach these courses again, I've already begun considering what other type of small group activities and discussion activities I could implement. Seeing the comparison of student engagement and use between the research activities of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 has shown me that if students are presented with an opportunity to work through course issues together, it can make a difference. As I reflect upon my teaching choices, I'm reflecting on the gradual release of responsibility scaffolding method. Years ago, I learned the method as the "I do. We do. You do" strategy. Regrettably, this is what I thought I was doing in Chapter 3 with the *Watchmen*. However, I realize I misunderstood and misapplied the use when "I" introduced *Watchmen*, and "We" (students and I) discussed it a bit in class, and then I left "You" (if I were addressing my students) to the reading to engage with it. However, I clearly see the errors in this based on the lack of engagement discussed in Chapter 3 and the motivated engagement shown in Chapter 4. I realize now that the "You" of the gradual release of responsibility scaffolding method doesn't need to be a singular student and could likely work better if it's groups of students engaging together before the singular student. Thus, as my approach to the classroom refines, an ongoing key will be to seek out opportunities wherein students get to be "You" together before being "You" alone. And I apologize for the utter grammatical mess it is in my head to be using "You" as a group of students together.

As for future research plans, I'd like to focus on the small group learning experiences discussed previously. As an educator, I found it quite motivating to see students dialogue, debate, reflect, and make meaning together. It felt close to watching them uncover new knowledge and through discourse and reflection transform the *new* knowledge into *knew* knowledge. The addition of small group reading and discussion on the research approach in this

dissertation was an epiphany of sorts for me. I'd like to spend more time and consideration on how intimately this has been used in efforts to see if students are recognizing its potential. I suppose my real interest here is whether students recognize and/or appreciate the difference between the two different "You" elements (you the individual student or you the group of students) in learning environments. With this, my head is filled with wonder, questions, ideas, and even the occasional hunch.

I'm filled with many excited "What If" opportunities. I'm excited to see where all of this may lead. As such, my future research will, at least for the moment, be aimed along the complex path of the varied "You." In a rather cosmic irony, I've spent the last few days norming with colleagues at the community college where I teach and pouring over multiple samples of student essays; a large number of which are blaming teachers for boring classes and student apathy toward learning that are often stemming, at least in this round of norming, from what I would now call the teacher "I" approach that doesn't progress. Setting my various concerns aside, I'm left wondering whether students would find—or have found—autonomy, praxis, immersion, and engagement with more "You" opportunities.

The learning I have experienced during the crafting, conducting, analyzing, and reflecting of this dissertation is leading toward a difference for the community college, and, as such, the community itself where I teach. One rather clear example of this is evident in a course I recently created and presented to our college curriculum committee for approval. The course is a new Humanities course focusing on American culture. During the course creation process, I was tasked with creating a master syllabus for the course that would share the necessary information for any future instructor, advisor, transferring student, or others to get a clearer picture of what the course should and inevitably would entail. One such piece of information is the course

description to be used on any syllabi for the course and in the college's course catalogue. The description shares the following:

> This course is designed to introduce students from a variety of programs to a humanities approach into American Culture. This exploration will focus on the way the humanities and their concern with art, ethics, history, philosophy, and culture analyze the cultural production and reproduction of values in the United States. This course will stress interaction through writing, collaborative assignments, presentations, and discussions to emphasize the humanities' commitment to self-discovery, expression, and reflection.

This is the first master syllabus I have created for the college, and I specifically included elements like "collaborative assignments" as foundational for the course as a result of my wrestling with "You" in the latter stages of this dissertation. It may seem a small step, but "what if" it's an important step? As I move forward, I'll be asking the committee tasked with creating the agenda for each semester's Professional Development in-service, the college's Academic Council, for the opportunity to share this approach to "You" in master syllabus creation, course methodology, and teaching. Again, this feels like an important step in sharing these experiences and this learning. In very real, intimate, and important ways, my colleagues at Mid Michigan Community College are some of the closest examples of people with whom I form an academic community; it is a community that is readily symbolic of a close-knit, real-world version of Burke's (1976) parlor discussion:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for

> you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. (pp. 110-111)

"What if" this is my oar? Well, then I think that a much like younger me, spinning the red comic rack slowly, would feel safe in saying we've done something to battle the bad guys and work towards some version of a better future kids and teachers like us.

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