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Though This Be Madness, Yet There is Method In't: Using Graphic Shakespeare Texts to Create Meaningful Engagement in the High School Classroom

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**Though This Be Madness, Yet There is Method In't: Using Graphic Shakespeare
Texts to Create Meaningful Engagement in the High School Classroom**

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THESIS

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Abstract

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This thesis covers the attempt to successfully motivate and connect with high school students by giving them the option of reading a graphic form of *Hamlet* instead of the original text. This research was conducted to not only dispel the myth that comics and graphic novels are juvenile and adolescent but to also explain the benefits of such texts to educators and administrators.

For this research, 10th graders were assigned *Hamlet* and were allowed to select the graphic text over the traditional text, allowing for student buy-in from the selection. Students also took part in a project that allowed them to explore the themes of *Hamlet* in a very creative and unique way. The results of the research concluded that not only were the students highly motivated by the project, and made important connections to the text, but the graphic novel readers spent less time reading while scoring higher on assessments.

The research presented shows the benefits of the graphic medium while also connecting the skills used to the Common Core State Standards and even parts of the Danielson Framework.

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Dr. Thiele

Thesis

27 July 2014

The Beginning and Inspiration

As an only child, it was, at times, difficult to find things to keep me busy, especially in those winter months with nothing to do outside. In order to keep me active during those cold months, my father would take me for walks to the local candy store, *Sandy's Candies*, and they just happened to sell comic books.

I have been interested in comic books since I was a kid. At first, I would grab comics that looked fun: what I thought a comic book should be; my selections were usually influenced by the Sunday funnies. However, when I was in 5th grade, I discovered a comic on the rack during one of my visits to *Sandy's* called *The 'Nam*: a historical fiction comic that took place during the Vietnam war. My father was in Vietnam for two tours and had seen a good deal of combat. His stories never failed to engross me, so naturally, I wanted that comic, partially to read for the action, but as I reflect upon my thoughts and actions, I believe that I also wanted to find ways to bond with my father who was mostly distant.

He bought the issue for me and continued to purchase them for me so I could follow the Vietnam adventures Private First Class Edward Marks and his platoon. I would invent questions from the images and text in order to strike up

conversations with my father. He would never hesitate to discuss the comic with me, for I feel that it must have been therapeutic for him as well.

We moved around a good deal shortly after my discovery of *The Nam*, but my love of comics throughout my grammar school years and high school years, while not as emotionally impactful, was strong, allowing me to meet characters like Batman, Spiderman, and The Silver Surfer. In college, I was introduced to the dramatic, non-superhero, stylings of Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (the first comic to ever win the Pulitzer Prize). These two titles opened up my eyes, and introduced me to what I would call the graphic novel. Of course, amazing, impactful titles like this are, unfortunately, not the end all be all when it comes to comics and graphic novels, but they have really helped expand the way the graphic form is perceived. Author Ida Price argues that major publishers such as Marvel, Tokyopop, Yen Press, and Del Ray Books, are working with major authors and illustrators to create a bigger comic fan-base. She states that by "utilizing existing prose works and engaging their loyal and enthusiastic fan bases, publishers strive to attract a combination of longtime fans and prose authors as well as bring in new readers to both the comics medium in general and to the original prose works" (23). *Twilight* author Stephanie Meyer has collaborated with Yen Press to create a Manga style comic that received a 300,000 initial printing. While it is hard to argue the success of these types of books, it is easy to assume that all comics fall into the *Twilight*-type genre/audience base if you

are not educated on what other titles exist; however, one has to see that the market is developing for these types of titles, and if Stephanie Meyer can sell Manga books of her titles by the thousand, why shouldn't Shakespeare be able to take a large part of that market share, after all, he is the best-selling author of all time.

As I began my teaching career ten years ago, I was at a high school that did not encourage the use of graphic novels, actually, teachers were specifically instructed to not use any sort of "comic" in the classroom; the blame here can most likely fall upon the stigma created by comics that educators and administrators were raised upon: Sunday funnies and *Dennis the Menace* type productions. But, orders like the ones I faced at my institution of not teaching comics were dwindling around the country as an initial boom of teachers began incorporating this new type of book into the classroom. After two years, I accepted a new position at a high school that was very open to using comics in the classroom. In fact, there was a new teacher in my department already using *Maus* as Holocaust literature, and I wanted to see if I could bring my interest in the comic medium to the classroom as well, so after a brief discussion with her about what she was doing with the book, I decided to use the Pulitzer-winning comic in the classroom instead of the classic Holocaust novel *Night* since, at the time, Holocaust literature was part of the sophomore curriculum. My students loved it, and the discussions that erupted from the images on Spiegelman's pages were inspiring. We spent an entire period on the characterization of

Spiegelman only using an image that he drew of himself on the back flap of the book. The seed, for me, had been planted.

The experience with *Maus* was amazing, but I can remember the moment it became clear to me how I could use comics to teach literature on a more consistent basis in the classroom. I was driving my wife to a doctor's appointment, and we decided to stop at the local library in order to grab a book for the waiting room. I decided to visit the graphic novel section and selected a beautifully drawn version of one of my favorite literary works: *Beowulf*. I had this wonderfully drawn book read in its entirety as I waited for my wife's visit to conclude. As I sat there waiting, I reflected on how quickly my students finished *Maus*, giving us much more time to analyze it, and based on my read of the graphic novel version of *Beowulf*, with full-comprehension of the text, I thought about how much more rapidly they could read this version of *Beowulf* compared to the full text translation, leaving more time for discussion, activity, and other pieces of literature. So I created a question for my professional growth plan that I had to complete during that school year: "Could students read the graphic novel of *Beowulf* and obtain the same information they would from the original text in a shorter time frame?"

I had my curriculum director order a class set of Gareth Hinds' *Beowulf* and a class set of one of the more popular English translations. I used my two AP Literature classes that year to support my thesis. I had 54 students over two class periods. I knew that not all of the students would want to try to read the

graphic novel, so I allowed them to select the graphic novel or the original text. With a few of the students not caring either way, I ended up with 27 students reading the graphic novel and 27 of them reading the textual translation of the epic poem. I had the students log their actual reading time (see table 1):

Table 1

Beowulf Reading Time Log Information

27 Students: Graphic Novel	27 Students: Full Text
Collective reading time of all 27 students: 60 Hours	Collective reading time of all 27 students: 155 Hours
Average time per student: 2.2 Hours	Average time per student: 5.7 Hours

Source: AP Language and Composition: *Beowulf* Time Log Information. Personal Interview. October 2011.

Many of the “Full Text” readers admitted to not finishing or using supplemental sources such as Sparknotes or Cliff’s Notes; I encouraged them from the start to be honest with their reading journal even if they used those sources to get through the work. With that being said, the actual text reading totals should be higher, but even as it stood, there was still a 3.5 hour difference per student. This was remarkable but it did not answer the question: did they take away the same information from the text? I gave them an objective multiple choice test on the work; the graphic novel students averaged a 77% on the exam, and the

full text students averaged an 81% on the same exam. While there are many factors that could have led to these exam averages, I feel that it is safe to say that many educators would feel that a 4% difference is a small differential when considering how many hours each student spent reading.

The 4% difference becomes even more minute when we consider that when the students discussed *Beowulf* on their AP Literature essay responses, both sets of students were able to write about the novel in such an elevated fashion that, by just reading the essays, I had no idea which text they had read. I was inspired with the realization of how many more texts could be taught in the same time frame as one or two actual novels.

These discoveries do not even scratch the surface of the benefit of the graphic novel in the classroom. First semester of this year, my AP Language and Composition juniors read the Gareth Hinds' *Beowulf* and during the Socratic Seminar discussions, not only were the discussions about theme, characterization, and symbolism fantastic, but we were able to expand our vocabulary with discussion of color schemes, line shape, panel construction, and page layout: more options and avenues for discussion on the AP exam, and this discussion of image is especially important in the AP Language and Composition class when we consider that there are images on the synthesis essay portion of the AP exam that the students need to examine and interpret.

And with my regular level English II class last year, I used the graphic novel of *Fahrenheit 451* that contains a forward by Ray Bradbury validating the

graphic interpretation as an alternative to the actual novel, and the class discussions, assignments, and essays were better than anything I had received from the students all year.

I have a good amount of experience teaching graphic novels in the high school classroom. Seven years after my initial use of *Maus*, our school district now has classroom sets of many graphic novels: *Maus*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Beowulf*, *Ultimate Spiderman*, *American Born Chinese*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and others. I was pivotal in the acquisition of many of these titles after the research I performed as part of a professional growth plan and classroom incorporation.

I have been conducting research on graphic novels in the classroom and presenting it at conferences for the past two years. My work has also been featured on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Daily Southtown*. After seeing the article about my classroom in the *Tribune*, Candlewick Press reached out to me, and this past November, a colleague and I had the amazing opportunity to present with award-winning Candlewick Press artist Gareth Hinds about using his works to teach characterization and inference in all ability levels in the high school classroom. Our discussions, during the planning stages of the presentation, rested primarily on the nuts and bolts of teaching these skills, but as we discussed our ideas further, and as my colleagues and I planned upcoming presentation proposals, I decided to see if there was a way in which I could use a title to not only teach the skills needed for the English

classroom but also to try to reach and connect to the students on a deeper level. I decided to use my favorite Shakespeare play: *Hamlet*.

There is no doubt that 21st Century students have a deep connection to the visual, and this idea can be further exemplified by examining a study done at The University of Chicago during the summer of 2012. A cellular biology instructor wanted to determine how exposure to the graphic medium would affect his students in the classroom. Forty-nine students between the ages of 18-21 that were enrolled in the biology course were given a graphic text (comic book) that the professor created with the help of a couple of colleagues that covered the course material for the semester. The students were given the text before the semester started and were encouraged to visit it as much as possible. After the course had ended, the students completed a twenty-three question survey that asked them to expand upon how they felt about the inclusion of the graphic novel. The students were split up into five distinct attitude profile groups based on their perceptions of the course. The most common answers to the “agree,” “strongly agree,” “disagree” type survey were very positive toward the graphic novel in all five profile groups. Statements like “I found the graphic novel entertaining,” “I would like to use entertainment media like this graphic novel in my school classes,” “Entertainment media like the graphic novel makes learning more enjoyable,” and “I learned new concepts from the graphic novel” found their way as the top-placing vote getters in all five groups (Cirigliano, 2012). This study is important because it shows educators, across disciplines,

that students want these sorts of interactions in the classroom. My research found many of the same results; however, the *Hamlet* project probed a bit deeper into the effectiveness of the graphic novel in the classroom.

The Project

The ultimate goal of the *Hamlet* unit is to effectively engage students and connect with them on a personal level through the classic Shakespearean work and allow the tale to hopefully work as an entry point for classics in the future. As 21st Century readers, some high school students, at times, have a hard time connecting to classic works of literature and find themselves turned-off to the idea of reading “old books.” As educators, we need to create an entry point for students into this literature; this is why it is important that the students select which version of the play they would like to read; the selection promotes student buy-in. Also, this project is the next step in the natural progression on my use of graphic novels in the classroom, for while I have worked with the analysis of images, the portrayal of themes, and all other things that appear on the page, I have never spent time analyzing the connection that students may have to graphic texts on a personal level. I have also never had students think about a creation process such as the comic creation process and how images affect theme. The students ultimately had to work with artists to create pages that I hope to collect and publish into a book that combines my students’ thoughts and visions with those of established artists. The students, ultimately being responsible in the creation process of a published work, will be inspired to create a product that is not only amazing in concept, but noteworthy enough to include on a college application. The promise of an edge in getting into college should increase the quality of work. In the process as well, I plan to keep track of

reading times, to further analyze the efficiency of the graphic novel in the classroom.

The next two sections presented here will get into the “During Reading” and “After Reading” processes that the students went through while reading *Hamlet*. Since I taught this *Hamlet* unit to sophomores, I will be splicing the activities presented with the 9-10 Grade Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that align to each activity in order to illustrate how relevant reading a graphic text can be in the 21st century classroom primarily for skeptical educators and administrators. With that being said, it is also important that educators in the high school English classroom be familiar with Shakespeare’s titles since the CCSS require that each high school student be exposed to a work of Shakespeare’s sometime during the duration of the high school experience.

During Reading Process

Because there are many benefits to reading graphic novels in the classroom including increasing the interest levels of many students, I decided to let the students chose which version of the play that they would be reading: original text with interlinear translation or the *No Fear Shakespeare Hamlet* graphic novel adapted by Neil Babra. A little less than half of the 80 students involved (37) selected the *No Fear Shakespeare Hamlet* graphic novel as their reading selection. I also ordered three copies of *Manga Shakespeare: Hamlet* adapted by Emma Vieceli and three copies of *Shakespeare's Hamlet: The Manga Edition* adapted by Adam Sexton and Tintin Pantoja. The manga copies were ordered solely to supplement the original texts and serve as alternate interpretations to examine and for students to borrow if they felt so inclined to read alternate comic versions of the play or wanted to examine alternate *Hamlet* graphic texts as they began doing research for their own comic pages.

After selecting their chosen text, and participating in a number of anticipatory activities including a brief introduction to Shakespeare and the cultural significances evident in *Hamlet*, the students were instructed that they would be responsible for the following after the reading of each act: a one page personal reflection on the act; a graphic organizer in which they list major characters and their contribution to the Act and play as a whole, actions/plot points, themes (with textual justification for the chosen themes), and major predictions; a 5-10 question reading comprehension quiz; a reading time log in

which they were to write total reading time of all *Hamlet* materials for that act; prepared discussion points on the act. All writings were to adhere to a high academic standard including proper MLA format when applicable, and any writings that were deemed unfinished or lacking the proper effort were returned for further completion. The CCSS for this portion of the unit can be found below (see table 2).

Table 2

CCSS for Reading Literature: RL 1-3, 6

- CC.9-10.RL.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CC.9-10.RL.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CC.9-10.RL.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.
- CC.9-10.RL.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students*

For College & Career. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2>>

The personal reflections were collected and analyzed to find links to chosen theme (explained later) through personal real-life examples; they were be examined to see if any links to personal reflection and type of text chosen

(graphic or full-text) could be exposed. While the graphic organizer containing the “major characters, actions/plot points, themes, and major predictions” was mostly created to focus student reading, the development of the students’ discussion of the major themes that exist in each act will be analyzed to see if any difference is evident from the alternative texts. The comprehension quiz results were tallied along with the reading log numbers to determine, as with *Beowulf*, if the students with the graphic novel spent less time reading with little difference in assessment scores.

To further understand the role of director/editor (before we began the comic script pages and the students themselves would become director/editor), we watched the “To Be or Not to Be” film speeches as delivered by Kenneth Branagh, Ethan Hawke, David Tennant, and Mel Gibson; and we also watched the “Bedroom Scene” Act III: Scene iv from the Franco Zeffirelli directed version, the Michael Almereyda directed version, and the Kenneth Branagh directed version in order to further analyze and discuss director/actor decisions and how those play into our interpretation and understanding of the play. The CCSS alignment for this portion of the project can be seen below (see table 3).

Table 3

CCSS for Reading Literature: RL 7

-CC.9-10.RL.7 Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students*

For College & Career. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.7>>

After Reading Process

After finishing the play, the students came into the classroom to discover a list of ten themes evident in *Hamlet* on the board:

- Impossibility of Certainty
- The Complexity of Action
- The Mystery of Death
- The Treatment of Women
- The Act of Betrayal
- Familial Relationships
- Religion
- Power of Corruption
- Madness
- Revenge

I obtained these themes by simply doing a bit of research and editing/compiling the most obvious/abundantly collected themes from *Hamlet*. I wanted to give the students a broad base of themes to work from for this activity, but I did not feel that we had the time to create this list in-class. Plus, we must not forget, teaching *Hamlet* to sophomores (while many of the students are extremely intelligent), is a complex task; therefore, I wanted to make sure that the students were not overwhelmed with the duty of finding and editing down the themes themselves.

As a class (I had three sophomore honors classes) we discussed the list and, immediately removed a few of the less evident themes, attempting to bring the list down from ten to four or five. While each class managed to dwindle the list of ten down to four or five each, the discussions were unique per class and through some juxtaposition and discussion, here is where the classes ended in their selection (see table 4):

Table 4

Group Theme Selection

2 nd Period	3 rd Period	6 th Period
Revenge (2 Groups)	Revenge (4 Groups)	Revenge (5 Groups)
Forms of Madness (1 Group)	Uncertainty/Action vs. Inaction (2 Groups)	Madness (1 Group)
Action vs. Inaction (1 Group)	Family Dynamics (1 Group)	Betrayal (1 Group)
Contemplation of Death and the Afterlife (2 Groups)		

Source: English II Honors: Group Theme Selection. Personal Interview. May 2014.

After the lists were created, I asked the students to select their top two themes from the list and write them down with a number one and a number two next to the two they thought were the most evident in the play, with one being the most evident. I collected the papers and made piles of the chosen number one themes. The way the themes broke up, I only had to give four of the eighty students their second choice, everyone else was able to be placed into a group with their selected theme. This process of group placement was solely to create further buy-in from the students by allowing them to work with their chosen theme since all but a small handful of students were able to work with their first choice. I then placed the students in groups so that there was at least one

student in each group that had read the graphic novel, and one student that had read the classic text; this would become valuable as the project developed and the groups had to reference the *Hamlet* graphic text as well as graphic texts in general. The groups ranged from three to six students; these numbers depended on class size, number of students that selected a given theme, and an attempt to evenly distribute graphic novel and classic text readers. When examining the theme selection of each student, it did not seem that the text that they read had any influence on their selection; I did not have to do much work to place the students in mixed text groups. This alludes to the idea that the graphic novel did not sway the students to a specific thematic selection.

The groups were then instructed to select the three scenes from the play that exemplified their chosen theme the most and list them in order of importance to that theme. I explained to the students that they would be crafting three comic book/graphic novel page scripts from these themes: the most important would be a seven panel page, the second would be a five panel page, and the least important would be a three panel page. The students were instructed that they would not be responsible to draw any of the artwork, they were only responsible to craft the script/storyboard of the pages, and we would find the artists to complete their vision. This idea was created to allow the students to explore the play in a creative way without worry that they might be held back by their creative restrictions when it came to the drawing.

For three days, the students were instructed in the process of creating comic/graphic novel pages. The first step of the process took them through the examination of some of Scott McCloud's *Creating Comics* to begin to understand how a comic comes together the way it does by looking at how comic authors/artists create suspense, tone, characterization, pacing, etc. with the images and panel layout of a comic page. After analyzing parts of the book, students were assigned groups and selections from *Understanding Comics*, and they were instructed to find evidence, in the graphic *Hamlet*, of certain stylistic choices that the author had made and project and explain these images to the class; these choices included panel layout, angle/direction of drawing, and positioning of word bubbles. The students were then given a multitude of graphic texts and were allowed to explore the work of different artists in order to instruct and inspire the creative process before they began laying out their own pages. The final step in this pre-writing process included instructing students how to script a graphic page by showing them actual comic/graphic novel script pages. Unlike film, there is no industry standard to the comic creation process; therefore, I was able to show the students a multitude of page styles and allow them to select the one that worked best for them; however, their pages had to have structural consistency among their three. The CCSS alignment for this portion of the project can be seen below (see table 5).

Table 5

CCSS for Reading Literature: RL 5

-CC.9-10.RL.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students For College & Career*. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5>>.

The next two days included time for the groups to finalize their scenes, select layouts, settings, characters' appearance, and ultimately complete a first real draft of their pages. The students also had to select the amount of Shakespearean text that appeared on the pages, and they were to create the pages so that no understanding would be lost through any textual cutting. Students were instructed to assign roles in the group and prepare to discuss those roles and assignment of work in the upcoming mini-conferences. The CCSS alignment for this portion of the project can be seen below (see table 6):

Table 6

CCSS for Reading Literature: RL 4; Speaking and Listening 1

-CC.9-10.RL.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

-CC.9-10.SL.1.b Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students For College & Career*. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4>>. <<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1>>.

The next two days consisted of mini-conferences in which the groups had to present their pages to me; I read them, asked them a number of questions, offered a critique, and allowed them time to make appropriate changes to the script for the following class period. Many students needed to create a cover-page that laid out the setting, time period, look, etc. in order to convey information to the artists that was not included in the comics script pages themselves. These cover-pages were an organic change to the project that the students and me agreed were necessary for clarity in the communication of their vision to the artist drawing for them. The conferences were meticulous, and during most class periods, I was only able to meet with two groups. During the conferences, I made sure to check in with each student and discuss with them their contributions to the pages; however, most of the time was dedicated to the clarification of their plans and ideas. The CCSS alignment for this portion of the project can be seen below (see table 7 & 8).

Table 7

CCSS for Speaking and Listening: SL 1a-c

-CC.9-10.SL.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

-CC.9-10.SL.1.a Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

-CC.9-10.SL.1.c Comprehension and Collaboration: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students*

For College & Career. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/9-10/#CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1>>.

Table 8

CCSS for Writing: W 2, 5, 9

-CC.9-10.W.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

-CC.9-10.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

-CC.9-10.W.5 Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

-CC.9-10.W.6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.

For College & Career. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/>>.

Once the pages were completed and sent off to the artists for completion, the students completed a final project written reflection, and the students that read the graphic novel completed an on-line survey that I created to get some final reflective comments about their experiences with the text. The written reflection ("*Hamlet* Recap Assignment") as the initial graphic organizers, had to adhere to the standards of academic English, and the writings also had to contain support for any ideas or claims that the students had. Seventy-five of the students involved in the *Hamlet* project process completed this writing activity. The students were assured that I would not read the reflections until after their comics pages project was graded so that they could feel confident that their responses would not affect their grade in any way; although, I do not feel that my students would have had any reservations being honest with me since the classroom climate built throughout the year lent itself to open and honest communication. The assignment asked the students to reflect upon five questions:

- 1.) What theme did you select, and why do you think that is the most evident theme in the play?
- 2.) Did any part of the play speak to you on a personal level? Did you relate to any of the characters at any time during the play? Please explain.

3.) Thus far, what has been the most rewarding part of the *Hamlet* comic pages assignment? Please explain why.

4.) Thus far, what has been the biggest struggle of the *Hamlet* comic pages assignment? Please explain why?

5.) How would you rate this group project against other group projects that you have done in high school (not only English classes)? Please include how well your group worked together, what went well in the group, and what could have worked better.

The completion of these reflection results align to the CCSS listed below (see table 9).

Table 9

CCSS for Writing: W 1, 2e, 4

-CC.9-10.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

-CC.9-10.W.2.e Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

-CC.9-10.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Source: *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students*

For College & Career. Web. 3 July 2014.

<<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/9-10/>>.

The sole purpose of the first question was to get the students thinking about their initial reactions to the play in an attempt to deepen their response to question number two. The responses to question number one were fairly straight forward, mainly saturated with examples from the text that influenced their selected theme, "Fortinbras wanted revenge on Denmark," "The Ghost of Hamlet wanted revenge on his brother," "Hamlet wanted revenge on his uncle," "Laertes wanted revenge on Hamlet." As was mentioned, the theme of "Revenge" found its way as the main focus of eleven of the twenty total groups. Most students found the theme of revenge, as one of my students put it, "the most evident and relevant theme throughout the play because every event occurs due to someone else's wrong-doing resulting in another character's intent to plot revenge." Another student, like many others, began their response to this question with "We selected revenge"; even though the question asked them to reflect personally, the students proceeded to incorporate their group conclusion in their response, alluding to the idea that they felt much more connected to their group than I had anticipated. The pairing of groups by selected theme seemed to work when we consider group dynamics. In their responses to question number one, not one student mentioned a disagreement in the selected themes, even from the students that were asked to report on their second thematic choice.

The responses to question number two, however, were a bit more thought provoking. As I read through the seventy-five reflections, I categorized

the student responses in one of two groupings: students that seemed to have an honest personal reaction to the play (or part of the play); students that admitted to not having a real connection or seemed to commit to a response that read as quick and non-thoughtful. Out of the seventy-five, fifty-four of the students claimed to have an actual meaningful connection to the play; that equates to 72% of the students that completed the reflection. This is not to say that the remaining 28% of the students did not enjoy the play or get anything out of it, in fact, eighteen out of the twenty-one that did not find a meaningful connection still spoke out in question five that the *Hamlet* project was a very effective assignment (more to come on question five in a bit); these students spoke to the ideas that the happenings in *Hamlet* were “too extreme” for them to relate to on a personal level, or that “era difference” and “language barrier” made it difficult to truly connect.

As I read through the responses that mentioned an actual connection, I found there to be obvious categories forming, and I ended up placing the comments into five distinct categories. The categories are listed here in order from most evident to least, and I also included a number of student comments from each category in order to illustrate the types of emotional connections that the students had made.

-Hamlet/Ophelia’s Emotional State

(23 Connections)

-“I think many people, especially teenagers, from broader

perspectives, can personally relate to Hamlet's character. In adolescence, we sometimes act without thinking, make poor decisions, have erratic emotions, and don't know how to cope with certain things. Anytime in life when someone does not grieve in a healthy way, or they are not given the opportunity to, like Hamlet wasn't, he/she will feel even more pain, and it causes them to act in ways they normally wouldn't. The emotional complexity of the play overall spoke to me the most."

-“I can relate to Hamlet when he finds his friends and family betraying him. I think to a certain extent, everyone has felt that way at one point or another. Throughout life, people deal with betrayal from friends, family, and sometimes complete strangers. I'm no exception to this. I have often felt betrayed by both friends and family similar to Hamlet. Although, not to the extent of them wanting to kill me.”

-“From the beginning, I said that everyone is able to relate to Hamlet at a certain level. Most likely not on the level that your dad was murdered by your uncle and your uncle married your mom but probably on the level of being alone and confused. Hamlet did not know if he should go on with his life or just give up. Everyone feels alone sometimes and very confused. Hamlet

is much like a typical modern day teenager with some of his emotions.”

-Family Troubles

(13 Connections)

-“The part of the play that struck me the most was when Gertrude did not really speak up for Hamlet. The fact that she would think her son is mad and not try to get any insight on his feelings is horrible. It kind of relates to me because I know that a mother should be there for her child. My mother is a very sweet person, but it’s hard for her to divide her time and attention among all 9 of us, so I relate to her. Hamlet is another situation though. He needed her, and she was not even there for her only child. That spoke to me on many levels.”

-“The bedroom scene spoke to me on a personal level. I related to Hamlet during this scene because of his anger toward his mother and her inability to see how her love life affects him. This scene seemed like a mirror image into my own personal struggle.”

-“I really related to the part where Laertes is leaving and tells Ophelia to no longer see Hamlet. Polonius does the same, and Ophelia obeys them. I relate to this because in my family I am the more obedient child, and I like listening to my parents, and I obey their rules as much as possible. So I relate to Ophelia when she

listens to her family and leaves Hamlet, even if she didn't want to."

-“I can kind of relate to Hamlet's situation with him not liking Claudius because my mom's boyfriend lives with us, and I don't like him too much. I feel like I'm at war with him like Hamlet is with Claudius.”

-The Loss of a Friend or Family Member

(10 Connections)

-“The beginning of the play was really easy for me to relate to. Hamlet feels a lot of grief due to his father's death (which is understandable). There are a lot of people telling him/making him feel bad about missing him and saying that he should be getting over it already. People deal with losses like that in their own way and at their own pace, and no one should try to tell them otherwise. I feel I related to Hamlet because people sometimes expect me to be over the loss of my father, but they don't understand that for some people it may take more time, and there is nothing wrong with that.”

-“Throughout the play I feel that, on a personal level, I connected with Hamlet and the loss of his father the most. The grief Hamlet dealt with after his father's death is the same grief I went through after my dad passed away from cancer in 2010. Although Hamlet

also had to accept the fact that his father was murdered, I believe Hamlet and I both experienced the anger and questioning that is part of the grieving process of a loved one.”

-“In the story, Hamlet is grieving the loss of his father. This part of the play speaks to me personally because when I lost my grandpa, I felt I needed to blame his death on someone just like Hamlet blamed Claudius.”

-“When Laertes came home to find his father had died, it got to me. I knew the feelings he went through as being the oldest and now having to protect his siblings. I understand the anger felt through his loss and how it was directed towards the cause of his father’s death.”

-Unrequited Love

(5 Connections)

-“One particular relationship spoke to me on a personal level: the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. I have been in a situation where somebody liked me and I didn’t feel the same way. Although I didn’t go mad, it was a very awkward situation.”

-“The part of the play that spoke to me most was Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship. As we talked about in class, unrequited love is very evident in this play. I have not been the victim of unrequited love, but I have seen the other in the situation. I

related most to Hamlet and Ophelia because they were falling for each other, but they could not return emotion.”

-“When Hamlet loved Ophelia and she didn’t love him back, I related. I didn’t necessarily love someone, but I had feelings for him, and he didn’t care for me. It really hurt, and I felt stupid and needy.”

-The Horatio Syndrome (Looking Out for a Good Friend)

(4 Connections)

-“I definitely connected with Horatio during the play. Horatio was the only person who was really taking care of Hamlet once everyone turned on him. I have also been the loyal friend through tough time, and I know how much heart and character it takes to remain by your friend even when nobody else is.”

-“The character that I could relate to was Horatio. Horatio was Hamlet’s best friend and was there for him through everything. My best friend’s dad died when we were in 6th grade. Her dad was her best friend so it was incredibly difficult for her when she lost him. She told me that she saw her dad in her dreams and even in her living room one night. She told her mom, and her mom didn’t believe her and thought she was dreaming. When she told me, however, I believed her every word and was completely there for her every step of the way.”

-“The ‘To be or not to be’ speech was one of the things that spoke to me a lot. It made me think of some of the people who I knew considering suicide. One of the characters I relate to the most is Horatio. Horatio knew his friend was not doing well, and he tried to be there for him. With everything that was going on in Hamlet’s life, Horatio didn’t really know what to do, or how to help.”

It is no wonder that the hands down largest group, in terms of numbers, was the “Hamlet/Ophelia’s Emotional State” grouping; teenagers are generally stereotyped as a very emotional bunch, and as one can see from the three comments that I chose to share here, the reflections on the emotional state of Hamlet and Ophelia brought the students to think about “poor decisions,” “erratic emotions,” “betrayal,” and “confusion”: motifs that exist very commonly in the life of a teen. The “Family Troubles” grouping came in second with a total of thirteen connections. While some of the emotional state comments could have been placed into this grouping, I made sure that this grouping was compiled of comments that solely focused on the student’s relationship with their family and that most other connections (that they may have had in their reflection) were weak in comparison. Some of the most powerful connections seemed to come out of this group, which is why I chose to list four comments from the grouping. I found it interesting as well that ten of the thirteen connections here came from female students. Ten students reflected on the

death of a family member or friend in category three: “The Loss of a Friend or Family member.” If a reader has lost someone close to them, this play might affect them differently, and I do believe this was evident in the reflective comments. It was very obvious to me that students that lost a loved one had a very real emotional connection to Hamlet, Laertes, or Ophelia. All five of the connections placed in the “Unrequited Love” grouping came from female students. Not all of the comments were about the female students being the subject of unrequited love, but they were the only students to reflect upon this idea.

The gender division in some of the comments could shed light on projects like this in unique ways. The obvious distribution in comments between some of the male and female students caused me to reflect upon a recent conversation that I had had with my former curriculum director’s teaching of *Lord of the Flies* to a blocked class of freshmen. Mike Jacobson, in an effort to study the difference between a male reading of the text in comparison to a female reading of the text, split the block by gender (one hour he taught the males, and the other hour the females), and while he did not alter much of the instruction, a completely different reading of the text began to emerge, and he was able to allow the students to pull out, without the fear of being judged by the opposite sex, a modern interpretation that connected to the state of 21st century gender roles. That is not to say that a divisional reading of *Hamlet* is necessary or as appropriate as the specific gender power found in *Lord of the Flies*, but when

educators are looking for alternative, unique ways in which to reach their students, it is worth it to point out the obvious division that I found in the reflections as a possible jump off point for continuous study.

At the end of the pack, we find only four students reflecting on being a good friend through the “Horatio Syndrome (Looking Out for a Good Friend).” This grouping compiled a list of students declaring their loyalty as a friend above all else, leaving them to relate to Horatio. Overall, these categories/groupings serve a greater purpose: to aide in the creation of anticipatory activities for the next school year’s *Hamlet* unit.

At the start of this project, I used an anticipatory guide sheet to inspire and dictate discussion amongst the classes. The general purpose of an anticipatory guide in the high school English classroom is to rouse interest and create avenues for discussion on topics, themes, or ideas before reading a literary work. For the most part, I pieced together the anticipatory guide handout from other *Hamlet* anticipatory guides that I had found online. These guides contained statements like, (Agree or Disagree) “Country is more important than the individual,” “It is acceptable to commit a crime to prevent another crime,” “All types of lies are moral and unjust,” and “A person has to confront death in order to understand life’s meaning.” These statements and their discussion warrant conversation, and we can find a link to *Hamlet* in these discussions; however, based on what my students chose as the most evident themes, discussing the more obscure themes found in the anticipation guide that

I created instead of exploring what they found to be valuable, might be a waste of time. This conclusion is bittersweet because while I will have amazing insight when I begin the creation process of next year's anticipatory guide, I had to waste a bit of time at the start of this unit discussing topics that did not speak to the interests and lives of the students, and as I reflect back to those anticipatory discussions for *Hamlet*, the discussions did not go as well as I would have liked them to go. What makes sense is a trimmed down version of what I had done with all of the questions and statements coming thematically from the actual student responses. There is also an amazing opportunity to get creative with the anticipation guides. Since I know that a few of these themes were actually dominated by female or male comments, I may decide to break up the classroom into male and female groups and create an anticipation guide for each gender grouping in an attempt to explore the conversation that comes out of the gender specific groups: an idea that might be developed if an educator works to pull out specific gender readings of *Hamlet*. This may lead to a dead-end; however, without the thematic numbers that came out of this project, this insight might become valuable in making even greater student connections to the story of *Hamlet*.

As we begin to discuss the students' reflection on the rewarding and difficult aspects of the project (questions three and four), it is important to take a look at the rubric (see Fig. 1) on which the *Hamlet* pages were graded. As one may witness from examining this rubric, there are many assessment components

present here that do not normally appear on English project rubrics. This rubric asks students to explain ideas of images that create a specific tone/theme, establish a clear focus (thesis), edit their work for economy of detail, vocally explain and defend all creative decisions, and produce a work that is original/thought-provoking.

Category	5	4	3	2
1. Images	Image creates a distinct tone that displays your chosen theme.	Image creates a tone that appears to display the chosen theme.	An attempt was made to use images to create a tone indicative of the chosen theme, but it falls short.	Little or no attempt to use images to create an appropriate theme/tone.
2. Point of View – Purpose	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains a clear focus throughout.	Establishes a purpose early on and maintains focus for at least two of the pages.	There are a few lapses in focus, but the purpose is fairly clear.	It is difficult to figure out the purpose of the pages.
3. Economy	The scenes are told with exactly the right amount of detail. They do not seem too short nor does it seem too long.	The page composition is typically good, though it seems to drag somewhat OR needs slightly more detail in one or two sections.	The page seems to need more editing. It is noticeably too long or short on more than one section.	The pages need extensive editing.
4. Point of View – Awareness of Audience	Strong awareness of audience in the design. Students can clearly explain why they felt	Some awareness of audience in the design. Students can partially explain why they felt	Some awareness of audience in the design. Students find it difficult to explain why	Limited awareness of panel placement and effectiveness.

	the placement of each panel is effective.	the placement of each panel is effective.	they felt the placement of each panel is effective.	
5. Originality	Pages are original, creative, and thought-provoking.	Pages are creative, but may be lacking a bit in originality.	While there may be evidence of creative thought, the overall originality is lacking.	No attempt to be original, creative, or thought-provoking.

Fig. 1. English II Honors: *Hamlet* Pages Rubric from Eric Kallenborn. April 2014.

It is with no surprise then, as we look at the answers to questions three and four that, for the most part, what the students selected to be most difficult about the project was also the most rewarding: being creative. The problem with most classroom group assignments, as I see it, is two-fold: they are fairly non-creative, sometimes used as class-time filler, and groups tend to be unbalanced in the amount of work that each student puts into the assignment, leaving many of the group members feeling upset and over-worked. As I discovered in the answers to question number five (we will get more into these answers later), students do not feel challenged by most school projects and they do not feel tested in unique and creative ways; this *Hamlet* project seemed to challenge them. Many students, through their answers to questions three, four, and five, spoke to the fact that I did in fact challenge them in many ways.

First of all, many school projects that I have witnessed over the years that do incorporate “comic strips,” have the students drawing three or five panel

strips to convey a scene from a work of literature, or the teachers ask students to create comics to help them remember vocabulary words for a quiz. The problem with these assignments is that most students cannot draw, and let us be honest; English is not art class, so they should not have to draw. The inability to draw, as many students reflected in their answers usually turns them off to assignments like the above mentioned. What I chose to do was challenge the students to explore whatever avenue they wanted to creatively in order to portray their ideas without any fear of having to draw a thing. By taking that pressure off of them, they were able to, over time, express amazing ideas through their scripted pages. In the answers to question three, the students expressed that the most rewarding part was the complete “creative freedom,” and the ability to “really use my imagination,” and “completing something that could be really good.” With the fear of drawing gone, the students were able to give themselves over to their ideas, and the idea of “completing something that could be really good” brings me to the other common response to question number three: the promise of being published.

I had the idea of ultimately compiling the works that the students created into a published work with the art completed by professional and semi-professional artists. The book would contain the *Hamlet* script pages that the students produced, the artwork from the artists, and commentary from both the students’ reflections and thoughts on the creative process of working with the students from the artists. The book would not be what my students originally

thought it would be - a *Hamlet* graphic novel. Instead, the book would be a graphic and textual telling of the creative process through the eyes of the teacher, students, and artists. I stressed how amazing it would look on a college transcript if the students could say that they were a part of a published piece examining a work of William Shakespeare's, and that seemed to inspire many of the students, for as a larger group of them mentioned in their answers to question three, the thought of being published was the most rewarding part of the process. The students commented that the idea of being published allowed them to "take pride" in the work and that "having credit for a published work" was "amazing" and "extremely rewarding." A couple of the students also commented that the fact that others would see the pages (artists, publishers, readers) inspired them to work harder than they had on any other school project, ever. And while this project seemed to place a bit of stress on the students, it ended up putting even more on me.

As the school year ended, I had contacted artists for all of the groups, and everything seemed to be in order, but as the summer progressed, and only one artist has turned in any work, I was worried, and as I finally sat down with the students' reflections and realized how excited they were to become part of the finished, published product, I became determined to not let them down; I needed to see this project to the completion of a published work. With that being said, there is a lesson learned from the answers to questions three: big rewards in the classroom will inspire students to do great things. However, as I

am finding out, these big rewards come with a price for the educator.

Ultimately, the students' answers to question three have inspired me to work harder to achieve this level of student reward in the future. I will discuss this idea a bit more in the analysis of the answers to question five.

The answers to question four surprised me. While I anticipated that the students would respond that the biggest struggle would be working in their groups, they actually claimed that the creative process was the biggest hurdle. Many students claimed to not be creative or imaginative, and it was their struggle to break through these fears and challenges in order to produce. Do not get me wrong, a few of the students did mention that a group member or two were not "pulling their weight," and getting the on-task was their biggest struggle, but it was refreshing and disappointing to find that the majority of the answers fell in the struggle to be creative category. I found this to be disappointing because at this point in their schooling, I would have hoped that the students would have been exposed to projects that challenged them creatively, but as I found in the amount of work put on me in order to get them inspired, it is very difficult to design and administer this type of lesson.

Question number five was where I anticipated getting most of my most pertinent information; I wanted to know how students felt about this project in comparison to other projects that they had completed in other classes throughout their two-years in high school. As I compiled the surveys, I placed the students in one of three groups: students that claimed to have had a positive

experience and enjoyed the project, students that were neutral to the experience, and students that did not care for the project. The results are below (see table 11).

Table 11

Breakdown of Experiences

Total Students: 75		
Positive: 64 Students 85% of Students	Neutral: 6 Students 8% of Students	Negative: 5 Students 6% of Students

Source: English II Honors: Breakdown of Experiences. Personal Interview. May 2014.

While the evidence suggests that the vast majority of students had a positive experience with the project, after I had seen the numbers, I decided to look up each student to see if there was a connection to be found between the students that did not have a positive experience and the students that were neutral or negative to the project. Out of the eleven that I placed in to the neutral and negative categories, I found that seven of the students found themselves in groups with others that were also listed as neutral or negative. Three of the students were in one group, and there were also two groupings of two that shared a group as well. That left only four students with a neutral (2) and negative (2) experience with the project in a group were all others had a positive experience. I decided to group the neutral responses separately

because I did not want them grouped in with the positive responses; however, the neutral responses were not disheartening or unenthusiastic: one student wrote that since there were not any examples of previous projects, it made it difficult to envision; two of the neutral students commented that, although the project was fun, the effort that a group member put into the project was lacking, putting stress on the rest of the group; two students suggested that there be other genre options other than “comic books”; and the last student left the comment blank, leaving me with a lack of a positive or negative comment to categorize. Three of the five negative comments mentioned issues of stress dealing with having to do more than others in the group, and two students simply wrote, “I didn’t get anything out of the project.”

The positive comments, on the other hand, were much more substantial and encouraging. Similar to question number two, many of the students reflected on the idea of being published and how the thought of that possibility made this project more unique than others from the beginning. However, there were many other items that the students mentioned that displayed their enjoyment of the project. These items are found in the following statements as reported in the responses to question number five:

-“This project, in my opinion, was the most fun and rewarding project that I think I have ever been a part of. I was very lucky to have such a fantastic group. I felt like I was on an All-Star team. We worked very well together and communicated very maturely.

We were very good at collaborating and listening to each other's inputs and ideas. Everyone knew what their responsibilities were and accomplished them in a timely manner. "

-“I really enjoyed this project because as a group, we were able to brainstorm creative ideas and not have to worry about our artistic abilities limiting them. Most projects I have done in high school have been fully completed by just me or my fellow classmates.

This project was very different. My group worked well together in my opinion. In the end, all of our ideas came together although it took us a while. We were all responsible in getting our work done on time.”

-“Personally, I enjoyed this project considerably more than I enjoyed projects in other classes. There was complete freedom, and I never felt overburdened by the work, and dare I say, I actually had fun with the work, which very rarely happens with projects. Another contributing factor that aided to my overall enjoyment was the fact that my group was great. We worked well together, everyone did their work, and there were no problems. I would not change a single thing about how my group worked and what we accomplished. There were no disagreements.”

-“Our group overall worked really well together. We were all comfortable with saying yes or no to ideas. We also were able to critique each others’ work.”

-“This group project was a lot more entertaining than other projects have been in the past. Every other project I have had the thought of my grade in the back of my head. With this project I instantly got sucked into the creative side and didn’t worry about my grade. My group worked well. We immediately split the work up amongst ourselves and got to work. Another thing that went well was that EVERYONE had at least 2 creative spins on how they wanted to change the story.”

-“I’m not really a big fan of group projects in general, but my group luckily worked really well together with taking our own thoughts and combining them. Everyone on our group also never complained about being assigned a page or character to work on. This group project is better than some other ones because it is fair, but also more relaxed because along with your own thoughts and creativity, you also have your partners and we will eventually have the artist’s point of view as well, so you are never alone on working in this project.”

Many of the other comments expressed these same sentiments: the students were pleased with their groups and the amount of work that they were

able to accomplish; they enjoyed the freedom that the project gave them; they were inspired by the uniqueness of the project.

The amount of students that commented that their group worked well together was staggering, especially since I placed the students in somewhat random groupings based upon their thematic choices; they did not select their own groups. Many educators will agree that one of the biggest problems facing group projects is the distribution of work within the groups, and while there are creative ways to support what students accomplish in work groups, I have never seen this level of honest student-reflection about the positive working atmosphere that was evident in their groups. Some of this may stem from the fact that they did get placed into groups based on their number one selected theme, but I also believe that there were other factors at work that contributed to the positive group dynamics. There is no doubt that the fear and excitement of being published inspired a good number of students to increase their normal effort; that was seen in abundance in the answers to questions two and five. But it is also evident that the fear and excitement of being published created leaders that took charge of groups in a more forceful manner than they might normally. During our conference sessions, one of the students, when asked if they were going to produce quality work told me, "There is no way I will let my group produce garbage if other people are going to see it." The combination of intrinsic motivation created by the possibility of being published and the joy of taking part in a unique project shaped these dynamic groups.

Based on a large number of responses from question five, I can safely say that many of the students were simply happy to take part in something original and creative. In the responses, a number of students mentioned that they were pleased to not be inundated with busy “research work” in which they had to “Google” the history of a country or some social issue. This pleasant process and completion of the project actually had students discussing the fact that they did not think or care about their grade because they were too focused on actually having fun and producing. To me, this is the biggest compliment. I think that most educators quest for that feeling: having students invested and involved in a process that is meaningful, student-driven, thought-provoking, and so stimulating that they cease to care about nothing (including their grade) but the completion of the assignment. After all, that seems to be the goal of a number of educational systems in this country as many schools have moved to the Danielson Model as their educator evaluation tool (explained later).

Statistical Results

The reading time-log numbers were collected from seventy of the students participating in the *Hamlet* classroom project. Out of the seventy, sixteen admitted to not keeping a log, or their times were incomplete, so I did not factor their times into the calculation of the following data (see table 12).

Table 12

Hamlet Reading Time Log Information

26 Students: Graphic Novel (3 did not turn in time logs) Total of 29 Time Logs Collected	28 Students: Classic/Translation Text (13 did not turn in completed time logs) Total of 41 Time Logs Collected
Collective reading time of all 26 students (fully completed time logs only): 68 Hours 24 Minutes	Collective reading time of all 28 students (fully completed time logs only): 97 Hours 16 Minutes
Average time per student: 2 Hours 38 Minutes	Average time per student: 3 Hours 28 Minutes

Source: English II Honors: *Hamlet* Reading Time Log Information. Personal

Interview. May 2014.

The calculations reveal that the students reading the graphic novel spent an average of fifty minutes less per student on the reading of the text. And out of the sixteen students that admitted to not completing the time log or turning in incomplete time reading logs, thirteen out of the sixteen selected the full text

version, and many of the classic/translation readers admitted to reading Sparknotes, the modern translation of the play found in the *No Fear Shakespeare: Hamlet* book that the full-text readers selected. While this evidence is not completely conclusive, it is fair to assume that the graphic novel students did, in fact, read an average of approximately fifty minutes less per student, and many of the full-text readers did use help (whether it was Sparknotes or a modern translation of the text) to complete the play, while the graphic novel students were only exposed to the language of Shakespeare that was found in the graphic text: a slightly edited down version of the play; the graphic novel did not edit out any of the plot found in the original play, but some of the dialogue was edited. The aim here is to suggest a very acceptable alternative, not substitution, to reading the full text that can satisfy the Common Core State Standards while reducing the amount of time students spend reading the play. That fifty minutes that was saved by reading the graphic novel could be used in the further analysis of the play; it could be used to increase the amount of time students have in the lab (or at home) to write an essay; the time could be saved-up throughout the semester, allowing time to teach a piece of literature that there had been no time for previously; however, the time saved is only important to the study if the students that read the graphic novel actually achieved as well as or better on the exam.

They did. All of the students completed five *Hamlet* comprehension exams (one for each act). There were five questions for Act I, and II; seven

questions for Act III; and six questions for Acts IV and V: a total of twenty-nine comprehension questions. The questions were created from a separate comprehensive *Hamlet* summary in an attempt to not create a bias toward one version or the other that the students were reading. Here are the results of the comprehension quizzes below (see table 13).

Table 13

Hamlet Quiz Results

Graphic Novel Readers Average (32 Students)	Full Text Readers Average (48 Students)
25/29	23/29
86%	79%

Source: English II Honors: *Hamlet* Quiz Results. Personal Interview. May 2014.

While a two question differential on the total point average seems inconsequential, a 7% difference on the actual average looks much more impressive, especially when considering that it is the difference between a high “C” and a solid “B” on the assignment. The point is not being made that if all of the students had read the graphic novel that scores would have increased, actually, if that were the case, scores might have gone down. Student choice plays a major part in the success of these scores. *Hamlet* is a difficult piece, especially for high school sophomores; however, to further see how the selection affected the students’ grades, we need to compare the quiz scores of

Hamlet to the quiz scores of an earlier title in the semester where there was no choice to see if there is a connection between student selection success.

First semester we read Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* with no form of graphic text, and that text ultimately became the text I was able to use as a comparison to the *Hamlet* text. At first, it might be difficult to see an obvious comparison between the two texts, and I do not see that as a bad thing, for if the Shakespearean text, being centuries older and more complex in language, yields higher assessment scores, it might speak even more to the quality of the *Hamlet* project and the ability of the project to motivate the students to achieve at a higher level on a more difficult task. To analyze the scores of the students, I looked at the only two assignments from the *Brave New World* Unit that tested their comprehension of the novel. One of these assignments was an assignment in which they had to create their own five high-order thinking questions based on four chapters on the book and answer them; the other assignment was a straight-forward short-answer quiz based on three chapters of the book. After looking at the scores from these two assignments and averaging them out, I found that seventeen students out of the eighty students that participated in both the *Brave New World* Unit and the *Hamlet* project failed the *Brave New World* reading comprehension quizzes: 21% of the total population. Out of the same eighty students, only nine of them failed the *Hamlet* comprehension quizzes: 11%. I also found that thirteen of the seventeen students that failed the *Brave New World* quizzes, passed the *Hamlet* comprehension quizzes, with seven

(over half) of them selecting the *Hamlet* graphic novel; the other selected the actual Shakespearean text.

The argument against this data is the obvious fact that the *Brave New World* Unit only had two reading comprehension-type quizzes while *Hamlet* had five, leaving the *Hamlet* students with more opportunities to raise their grade. While this may be true, for the first of the two *Brave New World* quizzes, the students had most of a class period and use of their books to compile their quiz questions and responses. Also, although there were more *Hamlet* quizzes, the *Brave New World* quizzes were larger in scale and actually counted for more points in the grade-book, and the students knew the point totals before all quizzes. With that being said, if we assume that points are generally a motivation for students, the *Hamlet* scores should have been lower than the *Brave New World* scores because each individual quiz had lower stakes since the point totals of each quiz were lower, so there must have been more working for the success of the *Hamlet* unit other than the fear of lower scores. The students showed that although they were dealing with a text much more complex, they were able to achieve higher on the comprehension assessments. In the future, it may be beneficial to look at a set of scores from two works of drama, or two pieces of fiction, from the same time period with one being available in a graphic text version as an option to achieve a more consistent set of data. The assessments would need to be exact in question number and type as well.

As mentioned earlier, the students that read the graphic version of *Hamlet* were given an optional on-line survey about their experience with the novel. Twenty-six of the students opted to participate in the survey. The results are below (see table 14).

Table 14

Graphic Novel Survey

Q1: Is this the first graphic novel that you have ever read?	Response Percentage	Number of Students (26)
Yes	19.23%	5
No	65.38%	17
Yes, but I have read other comics	15.38%	4

Q2: Did you enjoy the graphic novel of <i>Hamlet</i> ?	Response Percentage	Number of Students (25, 1 Skipped)
Yes	92.00%	23
No	4.00%	1
Meh...	4.00%	1

Q3: Would you like other books in school (not just English) to be graphic novel style?	Response Percentage	Number of Students (25, 1 Skipped)
Yes	92.00%	23
No	8.00%	2

Q4: Do you think you might have gotten more out of the text version instead?	Response Percentage	Number of Students (25, 1 Skipped)
Yes	4.00%	1
No	96.0%	24

Q5: Would you say that you completed more of this book than other books that you have read in English classes?	Response Percentage	Number of Students (26)
Yes	73.08%	19
No	26.92%	7

Source: English II Honors: Graphic Novel Survey. Personal Interview. May 2014.

The survey results of the students that selected the graphic novel echoed what the study at the University of Chicago found: the students found the project helpful, and they want to see more graphic texts in the classroom; question number two found that twenty-three of the twenty-five students had answered that they enjoyed the graphic novel, and question number three had the same numerical result as question number two when the students were asked if they wanted other classes to use graphic texts: twenty-three out of twenty-five wanted the texts to be found in more classrooms.

However, the survey did not cease to inform there. Out of the twenty-six students that completed the survey, twenty-one had experience with comic in the past. This, once again, reinforces the idea that students want choice and selection in their own learning process. I had twenty-one comics' readers in my classes that benefitted from being able to select the graphic text over the traditional one, even if the benefit was solely choosing a text that they might find themselves more invested in.

This might also explain why, in question number five, nineteen out of twenty-six students (73%) selected that they had completed more of the graphic text of *Hamlet* than other texts that they have read in school. Not only was the graphic novel a quicker read, which we discovered through the reading log survey, but we also know that twenty-one of the twenty-six survey takers had had experience with comics. Thus, the choice of comic/graphic texts arguably increases educational buy-in for comic readers and some students being exposed to the medium for the first time.

And while there is no absolute way to be sure, since they had not read the original text, it is interesting that twenty-four out of twenty-five (96%) of students surveyed selected that they would not have gotten more out of the original text. The fact that 96% of the students surveyed felt this way alludes to the idea that the students felt confident in their ability to know the text, for if the students felt underprepared for the assessments and project, more of them would have stated that they might have gotten more from the original text.

Moving forward, I think it would be beneficial to give the same type of survey to the original text readers and see if they felt the same way. Would a higher percentage of the original text readers have said that they might have gotten more out of the original text? Would as many students have enjoyed *Hamlet*? But, even though I did not survey those students that read the original text, I feel that as a result of the project, the students' investment allowed them to become self-motivated, and in the current educational climate, it is more important than ever for students to become invested by any means necessary, for the educational evaluation tool that many school districts are adopting require students to be self-motivated and invested.

The Danielson Framework

As many school districts across the country adopt Charlotte Danielson's four domain constructivist framework as their means of evaluating educators, many teachers must renovate their instructional modalities in order to adjust to changing times; eventually, 40% of a teacher's evaluation could be based on their students' test scores, and 60% will be based on in-class observations. Actually, according to the Illinois State Board of Education web site, by September 1, 2016, "All Illinois schools must begin using new teacher evaluation systems that incorporate student growth measures" (Performance). These growth measures will most likely come in the form of standardized testing applied to the students. A June, 2013 article from the *Huffington Post* reported that, at the time of the article, "a format based on the Danielson rubrics is already being used to evaluate teachers in at least thirty-three struggling schools in New York City. Kentucky has been using an adapted version of Danielson's Framework for Teaching to evaluate teachers since 2011 and according to the New Jersey Department of Education, sixty percent of nearly 500 school districts in the state are using teacher evaluation models developed by the Danielson Group" (Singer). Illinois, as well as most other states, are preparing their teachers for the incoming assessment of their teaching which may end up affecting pay raises as well.

In our school districts' two-years with the framework, it is obvious that the four-tier Danielson teacher evaluation rubric makes it difficult for educators

to score an overall score of four: “Distinguished”: the highest score an educator can achieve. The reason that it is difficult for many educators to score a four is that we have not had much experience with the student-led classroom, and that is a major focus of the Danielson Framework. There is much pressure placed upon educators to achieve at the rising levels that the Danielson Framework presents. Education Professor Alan Singer, Hofstra University, claims that the educational evaluative pressure of the Danielson Framework may work against the Common Core State Standards. He states that “unless the standards are separated from the high-stakes testing of students and the evaluation of teachers and schools they will become an albatross around the neck of education and a legitimate target for outrage from rightwing state governments, frustrated parents, and furious teachers, and they will never be achieved” (Singer). So, there is much controversy surrounding the stress of the Framework, but even in the face of the difficulty and stress, many states are still moving forward with the program because, at its core, what it asks teachers to do is allow their students and their classrooms to become self-sufficient and productive.

The *Hamlet* unit sheds some light as to how student-driven instruction can work in classroom in the the Danielson Framework, and I have shown earlier just how easily sections of the project fit into the Common Core State Standards. For this discussion, I would like to focus on what might be the two most difficult domains on which to score highly: Domain 2: Classroom Environment; Domain 3:

Instruction. The other two domains include Domain 1: Planning and Preparation, and Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities. I feel that Domain 2 and 3 are more difficult because they are the ones that focus on student interaction, and while planning and professional responsibilities are important in our field, it is how an educator interacts with students that determines success in the classroom; brilliant plans lead to nothing in a classroom of poor interaction.

To begin seeing how this works, let us examine Domain 2: Classroom Environment: a. Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport; b. Establishing a Culture for Learning; c. Managing Classroom Procedures. The “Critical Attributes” of each section of the Framework are meant to inform and guide an educator through what a “Distinguished” classroom looks like based on that particular section of the domain (Danielson).

Domain 2a. Critical Attributes:

- The teacher demonstrates knowledge and caring about individual students’ lives beyond the class and school.
- There is no disrespectful behavior among students.
- When necessary, students respectfully correct one another.
- Students participate without fear of put-downs or ridicule from either the teacher or other students.
- The teacher respects and encourages students’ efforts.

Domain 2b. Critical Attributes

- The teacher communicates passion for the subject.
- The teacher conveys the satisfaction that accompanies a deep understanding of complex content.
- Students indicate through their questions and comments a desire to understand the content.
- Students assist their classmates in understanding the content.
- Students take initiative in improving the quality of their work.
- Students correct one another in their use of language.

Domain 2c. Critical Attributes

- Students are productively engaged during small-group or independent work.
- Students take initiative in distributing and collecting materials efficiently.
- Students themselves ensure that the transitions and other routines are accomplished smoothly.

We can see how much of what was done with the *Hamlet* unit adheres to parts of the “Distinguished” score for Domain 2. First of all, and I believe this to be of the utmost importance, I selected a project and unit that I am passionate about; this gave me the ability to never tire of the instruction of the unit, in the assistance to my students for the duration of the unit, or the immense follow through for which the project called.

Many of the “Critical Attributes” as listed in Domain 2a-c were found in the student reflections from question numbers two and five from my exit questionnaire; students spoke freely about their ability to correct each other and cooperate to achieve a task, and the notion that a majority of students commented on how much they enjoyed their groups, even though they did not select them, speaks volumes about their respect for each other and the teacher.

Through their conferences with me and through my monitoring of their individual group work during class-time, I witnessed firsthand the initiative of the students when it came to “improving the quality of their work,” and their ability to help each other throughout the entire process. Also, when the project was in motion, I did not need to begin class with instructions or lecture; students came in, got into their groups, went and selected their needed materials (which they all put back by the end of the period). I was there only to assist. Students would call me over to clarify part of the assignment or ask my creative input, but the instructional aspect of the project was very hands-off once things were going.

Domain 3 is also challenging. The following are the “Critical Attributes” of Domain 3: a. Communicating with Students; b. Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques; c. Engaging Students in Learning.

Domain 3a. Critical Attributes

- If asked, students are able to explain what they are learning and where it fits into the larger curriculum context.
- The teacher explains content clearly and imaginatively, using

metaphors and analogies to bring content to life.

- The teacher points out possible areas for misunderstanding.
- The teacher invites students to explain the content to their classmates.
- Students suggest other strategies they might use in approaching a challenge or analysis.
- The teacher uses rich language, offering brief vocabulary lessons where appropriate, both for general vocabulary and for the discipline.
- Students use academic language correctly

Domain 3b. Critical Attributes

- Students initiate higher-order questions.
- The teacher builds on and uses student responses to questions in order to deepen student understanding.
- Students extend the discussion, enriching it.
- Students invite comments from their classmates during a discussion and challenge one another's thinking.
- Virtually all students are engaged in the discussion.

Domain 3c. Critical Attributes

- Virtually all students are intellectually engaged in the lesson.
- Lesson activities require high-level student thinking and explanations of their thinking.

- Students take initiative to improve the lesson by (1) modifying a learning task to make it more meaningful or relevant to their needs, (2) suggesting modifications to the grouping patterns used, and/or (3) suggesting modifications or additions to the materials being used.
- Students have an opportunity for reflection and closure on the lesson to consolidate their understanding.

While the list of “Critical Attributes” looks daunting, what I found was that I was completing them without even looking at this list beforehand. For example, when I held the individual conferences with the students, the students had to explain to me what their vision was, how they planned on achieving that vision, and how the vision tied into the larger picture of developing an evident theme through the comic pages. Both during and after these conversations, I probed the students with questions to not only allow them to clarify their meaning but to also get them thinking about their thought process and any misunderstandings. Most of the time, I had the students talking with each other to clarify their ideas and make plans moving forward. They made project modifications on the spot during those conference sessions, at times adjusting their vision to complete the task, and every student spoke.

During these conferences, I (not having any idea that the “Critical Attributes” called for this) created metaphors to increase student understanding of the group dynamic, often times sounding silly as I related baseball, softball,

speech team, or track to whatever I knew they would understand from their experiences.

Before the lesson, I engaged the students in a comics' vocabulary lesson that enriched their understanding of the unit and what they were about to embark upon. During the process, students asked for clarification about that vocabulary as they attempted to incorporate stylistic industry comic standards into their work. When stumped, they asked me questions to help them clarify their product, and these questions were found with replies of other questions by me in order to get them thinking about their process, and their answers, most of the time, made them see where they should proceed from there.

When you look at what was happening in my classroom over those few weeks and connect it to the Danielson Framework for Domains 2 and 3, there is no doubt that "Distinguished" work was happening. And I can honestly say that while I had seen and looked at the Danielson Framework at times during the school year, I had not set it to memory, and I had in no way developed the unit around the Framework. So, how did it happen to line-up? I think the answer was that I was inspired. My love for comics and graphic novels was evident to the students, and in turn, they followed me. It is difficult to not be inspired when we see inspiration, and that is what was happening in my classroom; I created a lesson with a foundation in something that I love, I made it approachable for my students, and they ran with it. I feel that while many teachers find much of the "Distinguished" part of the framework daunting, we

are lucky in our district because we have a lot of freedom in what we do, and thus, as 2b of the Framework states, “The teacher communicates passion for the subject.” For without passion, how are we supposed to communicate and inspire our students?

Conclusions and Proposals

I set out in an attempt to connect with students on a personal level with the *Hamlet* project. Through the interactions with my students and analysis of their reflections and survey answers, I believe that there is no doubt that a personal connection to the assignment and the literature is extremely evident and will stay with the students as they continue their education (especially when the completed project is published); however, I believe that the project shed light on much more than creating ways in which educators connect with their students.

I exposed my students to a type of classroom work and conceptual framework to which they had never been exposed; they should have been much more skeptical. They should have been hesitant and frequently questioned what we were doing. As a student, I would have; the project, at first, was very strange and unfamiliar; however, I feel that my confidence and passion for the project and concept was unwavering, and the students noticed and acted accordingly: they trusted in my vision. This speaks mountains about allowing educators to have more input into their curriculum construction. If a school district cripples educator creativity, how can educators become passionate about what they are doing? That passion becomes obviously forced and stale. True, substantial, effective work, in the classroom, is accomplished through motivation, and that motivation needs to stem from passion. In the case of the *Hamlet* project, my passion was transferred to my students, and an amazing product was achieved.

This passionate response was what allowed the students to create personal connections to each other and the text itself. I had no idea that my students would have worked so well in the groups that I had assigned them. Usually, group dynamics are extremely difficult to manage, and more than a few students shut down or feel overburdened, but this project was different. As I mentioned earlier, the groups did not only work very well together, but they were not afraid to criticize, question, and edit each other's work and ideas with relatively no conflict. The question responses allude to the idea that the students were inspired by the thought of being published and the uniqueness of the project itself. The responses might also allude to the idea that the students did have a natural connection to the text, and since they were placed into groups that had the same thematic connections to the text, their mutual connections allowed them to work well in the creative environment while attempting to produce a completed product that truly captured their personal interpretations of the text.

I believe that a large part of the success also rests in the fact that the students were allowed total freedom: they chose the type of text to read, the theme they worked with, the scenes to use as a base to create, the setting and style of their pages, etc. The open selection of so many aspects of the projects created buy-in, and this buy-in made the students increase their effort for the duration of the project because they were invested by their choices.

This idea of student buy-in, created by student choice, added to passionate educators that create avenues for students to personally connect to the work in the classroom, creates success. This level of engagement needs to spill over to not only multiple-disciplined classrooms but the construction of the school system itself. Why are school districts not letting educators teach comics, graphic novels, popular fiction, drama, speech, etc. if that is truly what their educators are passionate about? When we think back to our favorite teachers, most people usually find themselves contemplating educators generally driven by some sort of passion. Whether it was the subject matter itself, the drive to make sure that their students acquired the concepts of the discipline, or the magnificent combination of both, effective teachers are passionate and find ways to connect with students in meaningful ways.

After our project was finished, I had many students, who had never been into comics or graphic novels, ask me if they could borrow a graphic novel from my classroom library. When I had asked them what type of graphic novel they would like, they usually responded with "I don't care." That response indicated that the students trusted me. The entirety of the *Hamlet* unit allowed the students to make a connection to me and my classroom. I will have many of these students again next school year as they move to Honors English II to AP Language and Composition, and I am confident that the connections made throughout the second semester of last school year will allow the students to enter the school year, in my class, with confidence and trust that, as long as I

have the freedom to create in the classroom, I will always set them on the right path...as long as I get this looming book published: no pressure.

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