

Researching the Tintin Effect

How can the active promotion of graphic novels support and enhance boys' enthusiasm for leisure reading?



by Val Bunn

An action research project was triggered by my hunch that graphic novels have become more popular since a volume of Hergé's *Adventures of Tintin* was selected as the Whole School Book in 2009. This is an annual event at Loughborough Grammar School wherein the same book is distributed to all the boys in the summer term. The library is closely involved with this promotion.

As the borrowing and browsing of graphic novels increased significantly after this event, it seemed appropriate to test the assumption that strategically promoting graphic novels would stimulate more boys to read for pleasure. Hence, I was encouraged, with the support of the Headmaster, the Head of Sixth Form and the Head of English, to investigate what I called the 'Tintin effect' and the impact graphic novels could have on boys' enthusiasm for leisure reading.

Library sessions were booked over a five-week period, including a visit from Dave Shelton, author of the graphic

novel, *Good Dog, Bad Dog*, which was arranged for week three. Prior to this, I undertook a major review of the graphic novel provision in the library. I extended the graphic novel shelving, purchased new stock, put up new posters which were designed to advertise the graphic novels in the collection and strategically placed new seating cubes nearby. As well as this, I re-categorised the graphic novels along genre and publisher lines, for example DC, Marvel and European graphic novels were grouped separately. I also devoted three shelves to displays of new and eye-catching stock.

Context of Research

Loughborough Grammar School is an academic independent school of over 1,000 boys aged 10–18 years. There is a strong reading culture in school. Junior fiction is particularly popular, with Years 6–9 reading five times more fiction ▶▶



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▶▶ than Years 10–11. Loan statistics show that reading decreases in Year 9. These statistics also reflect that Year 9 are borrowing more graphic novels than the younger boys.

Participants

The sample was a group of 22 Year 8 boys, aged 12–13, chosen by the Head of English. They were a mixed ability group with English as their first language. During the previous year their loan statistics showed that they had read 185 books between them, including 41 graphic novels. Three of the boys had no loans at all.

Research Method

I found the interpretative nature of action research particularly relevant and I used the ‘I wonder what would happen if’ approach, suggested by McNiff (2010). Qualitative techniques were mainly employed to explore the research topic using questionnaires, videos, photographs, participant reflections and field notes to give some measure of triangulation. In addition, I maintained a journal detailing the experience of action research and my observations made during the process. I also used data from loan statistics. The data analysis was manual and I looked for patterns and themes within the data.

Data Collection

As there were only 22 in the focus group, I was able to use a variety of data collection methods, both qualitative and quantitative. A questionnaire was given to each boy during the first and final library session of the research project; the same questions were asked so that reliable comparisons could be made. There was room for brief comments as well thereby allowing the boys’ voices to be used as authentic data.

The library visits were filmed and photographs were taken so that any changes in behavioural patterns could be noted. Dave Shelton’s talk, which included a question and answer session, was similarly observed. The boys were all asked for written reflections regarding the question ‘What did you think of the author visit?’

The quantitative data was derived from each participant’s borrowing record from September to December which provided specific evidence regarding any increase in their leisure reading. In addition, the ‘Top 100 Loans’ for the same



period showed the impact of the graphic novel promotion on boys’ reading throughout the school.

Results

The author visit

The author visit emerged as a significant factor regarding the boys’ engagement with graphic novels. It was strikingly successful with 13 of the 22 responses being exceptionally positive. One participant noted that, ‘I will definitely be going to read more graphic novels like *Watchmen*, Dave Shelton’s next book and others’. Watching the filming of the author session reinforced this positive enthusiasm. The enjoyment and exuberance of the group was clearly evident in the boys’ applause, eager questions and comments. Dave Shelton’s love of comics complemented the action research topic perfectly and he promoted the genre with enthusiasm. He sold 12 copies of his book *Good Dog, Bad Dog* to members of the group and in each he added a cartoon drawing of one of the dog detectives. This really thrilled the boys and one wrote, ‘I am making a comic book now. I am inspired’, while another commented that, ‘I have started reading his book and thought it was incredible’. The graphic novelist visit was a key element in the success of the graphic novel promotion. There is no better evidence than one boy’s comment that, ‘Dave Shelton has opened my mind to the world of comics’.

The research findings also show that the boys’ enthusiasm for reading graphic novels increased as a result of Dave Shelton’s session. Participant answers to the question



‘How often do you read graphic novels?’ indicated that boys who read graphic novels ‘daily’ increased from one to four; boys who read graphic novels weekly increased from five to nine; boys who ‘never’ read graphic novels decreased from nine to four.

There were positive comments from the ‘never read graphic novels’ group, including, ‘it was a good experience talking to Dave Shelton as it boosted my confidence to read graphic novels’. Another boy noted that he had begun reading *Good Dog, Bad Dog*.

In the second questionnaire one of the boys wrote, ‘I am now really enjoying graphic novels as more of an art’. This showed what a positive impact a graphic novelist had in this specific genre promotion and how it successfully enhanced boys’ engagement with reading for pleasure. Another boy really enjoyed the author session, ‘as Dave Shelton introduced us to many other comics and comic authors’. This resonates with Booth’s (2002, p.61) comment that the personal feelings that children develop from meeting authors promotes further reading of selections by those authors, along with books on related themes.

This was certainly true from several of the boys’ answers. ‘I enjoyed the way he interacted with us and talked to us about books, after that I am more interested in graphic novels’ and,



'he has inspired me to read graphic novels more'. A review from the comic book website *Toonhound* (2010 online) sums this up perfectly by stating that for a reader who has recently discovered

the joys of Tintin or Asterix, *Good Dog, Bad Dog* is 'just the ticket for turning young eyes towards a wonderful world of comics' (para.8).

Browsing, not borrowing

Browsing, rather than borrowing, was the second theme that added important evidence in answering my research question. From the filming I could see that the boys gravitated to the newly-updated graphic novel section. They settled quickly and looked relaxed. After their library visits, I observed that the graphic novel area of the library showed by far the greatest amount of use. Comments such as 'with a graphic novel you can read a bit and come back to it' and 'I sometimes pick up a graphic novel when I have a bit of spare time in the library' indicated how the boys liked to browse the graphic novel section.

Analysis of the photographs, video and personal observations all showed that the boys were relaxed browsers of graphic novels in the library sessions. One comment was that, 'you can read a book and just relax' and another said 'I love to read graphic novels and reading for pleasure as it's so fun'.

I chose a time when the boys had the library more or less to themselves and I could see that this allowed them to browse with no pressure placed on them to quickly select a book and then leave. The provision of new seating cubes in the reading corner adjacent to the new graphic novel display encouraged boys to stay there and read. One boy wrote, 'I think reading is great because it calms you down, you can sit down with a book and relax'. Replies to the question 'Which section of the library do you go to first?' showed that the graphic novel promotion had had an impact as the number of boys who gave 'the graphic novel section' as their answer increased to twelve from eight.

I assumed that the boys in the focus group would snap up the new stock straight away but this was not the case. They borrowed 28 books, six of which were graphic novels, but none of those were the new books so perhaps the browsing aspect of graphic novels was the appeal.

The library sessions, which were each an hour long, showed that the boys were very happy to read in the library rather than borrowing books to read later, which explains why only six graphic novels were actually borrowed.

Photographs and observation indicated that the boys were enthusiastic readers of graphic



novels in the library and I noticed that these same boys came back during break, lunchtimes and after school to finish books. It also explains why the graphic novel section was the most disturbed every day.

Further evidence of the increasing popularity of graphic novels as a consequence of the intervention, was the growing enthusiasm for the Tintin books. In the first questionnaire, in response to the question 'Was Tintin a good choice for a School Book?' eleven of the 22 boys answered yes. This increased to 17 in the second questionnaire which also revealed that ten boys had read further Tintin books, including one boy who said he had read, 'ALL of them'. Another boy described *Good Dog, Bad Dog* as, 'somehow Tintin, but with dogs'.

The evidence indicates that promoting graphic novels through an author talk did enhance boys' enthusiasm for voluntary recreational reading. Favourable comments from the second questionnaire confirm this, including, 'I think graphic novels are really interesting, and once you start reading one you can't put it down. I was never into graphic novels until recently', as well as, 'I will definitely be going to read more graphic novels'. Another boy wrote, 'I think we should have more graphic novels because when you read them you are more involved in the story because you see and read what is happening'.

Conclusion

A comment on the Lovereading website (2011 online) encapsulates the appeal of graphic novels in a boys' school stating that, 'graphic novels enhance reading skills and are particularly helpful in getting reluctant readers reading more enthusiastically' (para.4). My research strongly supports the conclusions of the Canadian Council on Learning (2010) that comics and graphic novels have become an undeniable aspect of popular culture with so many films based on them, appealing to boys in particular. I agree that school libraries should reflect boys' interests by embracing graphic novels to keep boys reading and prevent their reading enjoyment decreasing as they get older.

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