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Title: Reader's choice: selecting from the amazing range of reading opportunities

Graphic novels are a popular reading format with the boys of Mazenod College, be they manga, anime, classic graphic novels or picture books for the adolescent reader. A strong culture of reading at the College is facilitated by timetabled free, voluntary reading classes for students of Years 7-9 that also flows through to some Year 10 English classes. The range of reading abilities and mixed levels of enthusiasm for reading are typical of Australian secondary college students although the culture is one where it's 'OK to be a reader'. Mazenod is a Catholic boys college in eastern suburban Melbourne; a multicultural community representing over 100 different nationalities with many students from homes where English is the second language.

Investigating student activity
This investigation into the online reading habits of our students arose from observing them accessing and sharing online graphic novel sites within the library during recess and lunch breaks. While some students read alone, reading and sharing 'good reads' is an obvious social activity. We already know that these students are avid readers of hard copy graphic novels, the purpose of this exercise was to establish what they read for recreation online and how this fits with what we provide as a school library. Do they read online instead of borrowing from the library or is reading online a supplement to their current reading practice? What is the attraction to reading online?

The research for this article was informal with students happy to share their knowledge and opinions. It involved questions asked of students during reading classes or while in the library during their free time. It didn't involve a specific set of questions but rather, took the form of an information seeking conversation with questions about preferences, motivation and satisfaction they experienced as readers. The survey group was not large. Fourteen students were interviewed - but it was evident from early in the investigation that their experiences were similar.

Predominant findings
The predominant finding was that in reading online students prefer the free manga sites, although they were also happy to read traditional comic formats if they were free. They did not prefer the online version to the hardcopy, however preference for the online version overwhelmingly related to access to the story, getting the next chapter, moving on. According to Year 7 student, Spencer, even though he reads online constantly, his preference is for the hard copy book 'because you don't have to wait for the next chapter to download, you can just keep reading.' The attraction of online reading for him is the regular release of new chapters.

The old argument
Before going any further, let us pause a moment to dismiss any argument about the legitimacy of graphic novels as a choice of reading material for students. One hopes that this argument has been well and truly decided, but it is still not uncommon to hear objections from teacher-librarians and English teachers who prefer to have a student struggle through a 'novel' rather than enjoy the pleasure of simply reading and getting lost in a story. Stephen D Krashen, author of the acclaimed *The Power of Reading* is renowned for his research and advocacy in defense of comics. Krashen says the attraction for comics lies

in the fact that 'the texts of comics are linguistically appropriate, and pictures can help make the texts comprehensible' (Krashen 2004, p 102).

While stipulating that an exclusive diet of comic books will probably develop adequate but not advanced levels of competence in language and literacy development, Krashen (2004) says translation of the text through pictures holds the interest of the reader more easily. Having offered the graphic novel *Watchmen* to a reluctant Year 10 reader recently, I checked with him at the end of class as to how he had enjoyed it. His response, 'It didn't make me go to sleep, Miss', spoke volumes. He hadn't chosen his own book but in *Watchmen* found a story compelling enough to maintain his attention.

Krashen (2004, p 71) is actively involved in research supporting the value of free voluntary reading in developing comprehension and literacy skills, emphasising the potential of 'reading that is easily comprehensible and compelling, reading that the reader selects, reading that is done with no accountability, no testing, no book reports, but for its own sake, for pleasure.' In *Free Voluntary Reading* (2011, p 71) he states that where in previous publications he had hypothesised that input needs to be interesting for [language] acquisition to take place, he now suspects that 'interesting is not enough, and that input has to be compelling'.

Concern is also expressed about 'narrow reading' behaviours whereby students focus on one topic, author, or genre according to interest. Krashen insists that 'self-selection and narrow reading nearly guarantee interest and comprehensibility because of greater background knowledge, which increases as readers read more, and because of greater knowledge of the language.' (2004 p 72) With this in mind, the preferences of readers can be moved along in the process of guiding their development.

What's being read online?
So what are students reading? There is no end of reading materials freely available online. Sites such as *Storyline* <http://www.storylineonline.net/> where members of the Screen Actors Guild Foundation read well known stories; *Project Gutenberg* <http://www.gutenberg.org/> presents thousands of free ebooks; *Librivox* <http://librivox.org/> has an extensive range of audio books, also free.

When it comes to graphic novels, however, Mazenod College students overwhelmingly prefer manga and anime. Popular sites are *Mangahit* <http://www.mangahit.com/> *Manga Reader* <http://www.mangareader.net/>, *Manga Fox* http://mangafox.me/ where many comics provide regular weekly, fortnightly or monthly updates that are published as hardcopy graphic novels as they accumulate. Hence, Year 7 student Spencer's preference for being able to 'just keep reading' in hardcopy format. Popular apps for iOS and Android devices are: *Manga Storm* and *Manga Rocks.*

Toriko <http://www.mangareader.net/349/toriko.html>, a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Mitsutoshi Shimabukuro was a popular choice with boys involved in this survey. It has been serialised in weekly online chapters since May, 2008 and is currently at Chapter 240. As of February 2013, twenty three printed volumes had been published from these online chapters. *Toriko*, the online comic, is supported by a wiki providing detailed supporting information about his character, abilities and relationships. Students were less interested in the wiki, however, the activity on the *Toriko Forum* <http://toriko.wikia.com/wiki/Special:Forum> indicates that other readers are taking advantage of the opportunity to interact. This is only one example of the online serialised manga/anime novels available.

It's the story
Not all students responded with details of comics they were *reading*. Two boys were adamant about their preference for manga and anime video sites stating enthusiastically that, 'You don't have to read, you can just watch the videos'. They offered for reference the sites, *Watch Op* <http://www1.watchop.com> and *Crunchy Roll* <http://www.crunchyroll.com>. Nevertheless, these boys did acknowledge that familiarity with these stories would influence their decision to select the hard copy version to read during their English reading classes.

In following up the online recommendations from students it soon became evident that although they have an active peer recommendation process guiding their reading, they are largely reading in the open, uncategorised world of the web. *No flying no tights* <http://noflyingnotights.com> is one of the few examples of sites that categorises material as suitable for kids, teens and adults although students are not restricted to any particular category. I raised this concern with the boys. How can they be sure of the content they will encounter? How do they determine adult graphic novel sites? They were not concerned and responded, 'You can generally tell if its going to be too adult', 'You haven't paid for it, so you just close it and move to something else', 'You're usually following recommendations that are at your level'. They were clearly aware of the environment in which they were reading but were confident in managing the content themselves.

The practice of pre-marketing during the production phase and producing a hardcopy version once enough pages or chapters are written is common. The author of *Earthsong* <http://earthsongsaga.com> for instance, writes online until she has enough pages. She simply signs off the volume and publishes it into hardcopy. *Earthsong* has adult themes and has been available online since 2004. Other sites in this category are: *Glass Urchin* <http://www.glassurchin.com> and *Freak Angels* <http://www.freakangels.com>.

Other graphic options
Away from the manga and anime genre, comic enthusiasts are also reading the free material on sites such as *Comixology* <http://www.comixology.com> and *Dark Horse Digital* <https://digital.darkhorse.com> where individual comics in a series are offered as samples with the intention of attracting a purchase.

This research exercise amongst our readers at Mazenod College has highlighted how important it is that we, as professionals who are guiding the reading of young people, have knowledge of their online reading activity, being aware of it and factoring that awareness into our own library collection. The reading habits of students are changing as formats change. They are responding to availability. Bowkett and Hitchman (2011) confirm this saying, 'In reading comic books children are engaging with highly complex and structured narrative forms. Whether they realise it or not, their emergent visual literacy promotes thinking skills and develops wider metacognitive abilities.'

At Mazenod College, we are certainly witnessing an elevated level of interest amongst our readers as the graphic content of our collection increases. It seems more accessible to them. They are not limited to manga and anime but will also read from our broad range of classic titles such as *Robinson Crusoe, The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* to *Manga Shakespeare* and *Assassin's Creed* available in both hardcopy and digital format on iPads via *Ave!Comics* <http://www.avecomics.com/en/>.

Reading online is simply another reading experience for our students. The format is irrelevant - they are guided by the content, the excitement of the story. What is clear is that this exercise has merely scraped the surface of the changes in students' reading habits. It has not even touched on the growing range of transmedia reading experiences such as *Inanimate Alice* <http://www.inanimatealice.com> where the story uses text, images, music, sound effects, puzzles and games to illustrate and enhance the narrative. Opportunities for reading engagement and thus literacy development are increasing with the evolution of digital formats. Bringing these into our school libraries is an exciting challenge.

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