EXPANDING LITERACY THROUGH GRAPHIC MEMOIRS: A SELF-STUDY OF MULTIMODAL TEACHING AND TEACHER IDENTITY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL ENGLISH

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Abstract

This self-study explores how teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit reshaped my understanding of literacy and my identity as a middle school English Language Arts teacher. Grounded in multimodal approaches, this study examines how expanding beyond print-based instruction can support student engagement and create more inclusive learning environments, through the lens of teacher reflections on instructional choices and evolving identity. Data were collected through reflective journaling, identity mapping, and a post-unit self-interview. Findings revealed ongoing tensions between traditional print-based beliefs and multimodal approaches, an expanded understanding of literacy as inclusive of visual and narrative forms, and a shift in teacher identity. Students demonstrated increased engagement and communicated their knowledge using visual storytelling, suggesting that multimodal approaches can provide an entry point for reluctant or struggling writers. These findings highlight the importance of re-evaluating academic rigor and recognizing multiple forms of knowledge expression in the classroom. In the context of Hawai'i, multimodal approaches align with culturally sustaining pedagogies, which value multiple forms of knowledge expression, including visual, oral, and place-based ways of knowing. Overall, this study suggests that integrating multimodal literacy practices can support more equitable, engaging, and responsive classroom environments.

Keywords: multimodal literacy, student engagement, student-teacher relationships, classroom management, culturally sustaining pedagogy

Table of Contents

Figures

.

Introduction

Background

A student sat quietly during writing time, staring at a blank page. When asked to explain their ideas verbally, they spoke with clarity and confidence, but struggled to translate those thoughts into written text. Later, when given the opportunity to create a visual representation of the same idea, the student produced a detailed and meaningful response. Experiences like this have shaped my understanding of literacy and the ways students demonstrate knowledge. Over my nine years of classroom experience, I have noticed a consistent pattern: some students struggle to show their understanding through traditional writing, yet thrive when given opportunities to express ideas visually, verbally, or collaboratively. This observation led me to explore how integrating artistic and multimodal forms of storytelling might support student literacy development.

My current 6th-8th grade English Language Arts classroom at SEEQS Public Charter School in Honolulu, Hawai'i provides a context in which these tensions around literacy appear in practice. SEEQS, ("The School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability"), emphasizes project-based learning, interdisciplinary inquiry, and the exploration of real-world issues. I teach students with diverse cultural, linguistic, and artistic backgrounds. In addition to my class, students at my school regularly engage in collaborative, inquiry-driven projects that require them to communicate in diverse ways, making this setting particularly relevant for examining multimodal literacy practices.

Traditionally, literacy in school settings has been framed as proficiency in print-based reading and writing tasks, a narrow definition that many scholars have challenged in favor of

broader, multimodal perspectives (Siegel, 2012; Serafini, 2014). In my classroom, I have observed that many students disengage when literacy is presented solely through long printed texts or conventional comprehension tasks. However, when invited to engage with visual storytelling, graphic novels, drawing, and discussion as multimodal forms of literacy, these students often demonstrated deep thinking, creativity, and engagement.

Observing students' responses to multimodal tasks made it clear that when literacy goes beyond alphabetic text, students who typically disengage often find renewed confidence and voice. These experiences also prompted me to reconsider my own assumptions about what counts as rigorous literacy work, recognizing that visual composition and analysis can be just as intellectually demanding as traditional print-based tasks. This realization has played a major role in my decision to design and teach a graphic memoir unit that blends narrative writing, visual art, and multimodal composition.

As a child and young adult, I prided myself on reading challenging, text-heavy books in both English and Spanish, which were the primary forms of literacy valued in my home and schooling. Throughout my primary and secondary schooling experiences, I came to associate print-based reading with academic success, while viewing comics or picture-based books as less rigorous. Because I consistently performed well in traditional reading and writing, these experiences reinforced my belief that strong literacy was primarily demonstrated through print alone, not paired with photos and speech bubbles.

After college, I spent more than five years teaching abroad in China, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, while also working with online students from a wide range of linguistic and cultural

backgrounds. During this time, I engaged in learning multiple languages, each of which had different structures and modes of communication.

The language I spent the most time and effort learning was Chinese, which required me to rely on the memorization and recognition of characters rather than phonetic decoding. The characters often felt like drawings, and writing them required significant attention. I approached each character almost as if I were drawing in my Chinese classes. This process was challenging, and I remember worrying about how I would ever develop proficiency beyond elementary-level texts.

However, my years living in Beijing brought many lived experiences that helped me improve and retain my Chinese skills more than practicing reading and writing in the language did. For example, daily interactions at the market while getting my fruits and vegetables allowed me the opportunity to retain vocabulary and dialect significantly. This encounter with Chinese challenged how I understand what it means to read and write.

My time in Thailand and Vietnam further complicated my understanding of literacy. Despite my interest in language learning, I experienced frustration and eventual disengagement when I was faced with unfamiliar and difficult writing systems. Ultimately, I stopped my Vietnamese and Thai language lessons due to feeling overwhelmed. In contrast, I found greater success learning vocabulary through daily interaction and immersion. Although I didn't realize this at the time, these experiences highlighted how traditional literacy practices can exclude learners when they are not aligned with accessible or meaningful modes of communication.

Similarly, learning American Sign Language (ASL) expanded my understanding of literacy as a visual and spatial practice. I was first introduced to ASL while living near Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., where many of the stores and businesses employed individuals who primarily communicated using ASL. Through everyday interactions, I began learning basic signs and developed an awareness of language that operates outside of written and spoken forms.

Upon arriving in Hawai'i mid-2021, I lived near Hawai'i School for the Deaf and Blind, and applied for a position when I saw an opening. In this role, I received formal ASL instruction while also working in an immersive environment. This experience deepened my understanding of how meaning is constructed without reliance on written text. ASL has a grammatical structure distinct from English and does not depend on written conventions to connect ideas, often omitting words such as 'the,' 'for,' 'to,' and "of", as the language prioritizes meaning, context, and visual expression.

Teaching English at the Hawai'i School for the Deaf and Blind to students who primarily communicated through ASL highlighted tensions between standardized print-based expectations and the diverse ways students made sense of language. These experiences continue to influence my approach to literacy instruction and have contributed to my openness toward multimodal teaching practices.

Growing up in a bilingual Caribbean household, succeeding in print-based academic settings,, and teaching across diverse international and linguistic contexts have contributed to my development as a visual literacy advocate. These experiences not only shaped my beliefs about literacy but also revealed tensions between my values as an educator and the print-centered expectations that continue to define literacy in many ELA classrooms.

Rationale/Problem

Despite increasing research on multimodal literacy, as many ELA classrooms, including my own at times, continue to prioritize alphabetic text as the most legitimate form of literacy. Chang and Asselin (2023) explain that "print-based approaches privilege the communication and comprehension of alphabetic print in literacy activities," keeping curricula and instruction centered on print-based texts and marginalizing multimodal or non-alphabetic literacies.

This emphasis on print-based literacy affects how student learning is recognized and assessed. Meyer et al. (2018) argue that when schools treat written language as the primary measure of learning, students whose strengths emerge through visual, tactile, or embodied ways of knowing are frequently overlooked or misinterpreted. As a result, their literacies become invisible within assessment systems and curricular expectations focused on written language.

This dynamic is something I have experienced in my own classroom practice. Although I value creativity and invite students to demonstrate understanding through visual and multimodal means, my instructional decisions often default to prioritizing alphabetic literacy as more academically valid.

Recognizing this internal conflict has led me to question how my beliefs, assumptions, and identity as a literacy teacher shape the experiences of the reluctant readers I most want to support. As a teacher in Hawai‘i, this reflection is significant, as it requires me to consider how my instructional choices either support or limit the cultural and linguistic assets my students bring to the classroom. This tension highlights the need to examine how multimodal approaches to literacy might better support student engagement and expand what counts as meaningful

learning in ELA classrooms. This need to better understand the role of multimodal literacy in supporting student engagement and expression informs the focus of this study.

Purpose of Study

In response to these tensions, the purpose of this self-study action research project is to examine how intentionally teaching multimodal literacy through comics, graphic memoirs, and other visual texts reshapes my understanding of literacy and transforms my identity as a literacy teacher. This study centers my experiences as a practitioner, focusing on my reflections, realizations, and moments of tension while implementing a graphic memoir unit that engages students in reading, analyzing, and creating multimodal texts.

This research is especially relevant for middle school ELA teachers, educators integrating multimodal or arts-based literacy practices, and educators in Hawai‘i working in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Using tools such as journaling, identity mapping, and a post-unit self-interview, I explore how multimodal teaching practices challenge and expand my perception of what literacy is, who it is for, and who I am as a literacy educator. Through this process, I hope to better align my beliefs and values with my instructional practices in ways that honor the diverse literacy strengths of my students.

In this study, visual texts refer to texts that express ideas primarily through images and visual design elements, often in combination with written language, such as graphic novels, and other multimodal forms (Serafini, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This study is grounded in research on multimodal literacy, teacher reflection, and teacher identity. Across these areas, a few key ideas stood out to me. Reflective practice enables teachers to make sense of the tensions and uncertainties that arise as they experiment with new pedagogies. Multimodal literacy challenges print-dominant paradigms and expands the range of valid methods of understanding and expressing ideas. Graphic texts offer powerful tools for inquiry, representation, and identity exploration. At the same time, teacher identity is dynamic and shaped by these pedagogical decisions and the contexts in which teachers work.

Existing research suggests that multimodal instruction can increase engagement, support for diverse learners, and provide opportunities for identity exploration. Reflective practice is also identified as central to teacher growth and pedagogical change. However, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses on student outcomes or general descriptions of multimodal teaching. Relatively few studies examine the internal experiences of teachers and their emotional responses, belief shifts, and identity negotiation when they adopt multimodal practices. Even fewer explore these questions through self-study approaches in middle school ELA classrooms, particularly within the culturally specific context of Hawai‘i.

This study addresses these gaps by looking closely at how my identity as a literacy teacher shifts as I implement a graphic memoir unit. By examining my tensions, reflection, and belief change, this research contributes to scholarship that connects multimodal literacy, reflective practice, and teacher identity development. It also offers insight into how instructional practices can better honor the multimodal literacies students bring to the classroom. Building on these gaps and the focus of this study, the following research questions guide my inquiry.

Research Questions

This study is guided by one central question:

- **How does experimenting with visual texts change my perception of myself as a teacher of literacy?**

In order to explore this question, I also attend to several supporting questions:

1. What tensions or insights emerge internally as I teach a multimodal graphic memoir unit in my middle school ELA classroom?
    a. This question focuses on my emotional reactions, moments of discomfort, joy, and pedagogical realizations that emerge as I implement a multimodal graphic memoir unit.
2. How do my reflective journal entries reveal evolving beliefs about what literacy is and what it is for?
    a. This question focuses on how my journal reflections show shifts in my understanding of what literacy is, the purpose of literacy, and the relationship between print-based and multimodal literacy in my classroom.
3. In what ways does teaching with multimodal texts such as graphic novels, comics, and visual storytelling challenge my previous beliefs about literacy and my role as a literacy teacher?
    a. This question focuses on how teaching with multimodal texts challenges and reshapes my identity as a literacy teacher and prompts me to reconsider my role in supporting my students' literacy development.

Together, these questions help me investigate how implementing multimodal instruction reshapes my developing beliefs about literacy and myself as a literacy teacher.

Theoretical Framework

This self-study is grounded in three interconnected strands of theory and research that provide a lens for interpreting my experiences teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit.

First, multimodal literacy theory challenges print-centered traditions that often dominate ELA instruction. Scholars such as Kress (2010), Jewitt (2013), and Siegel (2012) argue that meaning-making occurs across multiple modes via visual, linguistic, spatial, gestural, and aural forms, and that prioritizing print may marginalize learners whose strengths lie in other modes. This framework supports my examination of what counts as rigorous literacy work and how students demonstrate understanding in my classroom.

Second, research on teacher identity and reflective practice frames identity as dynamic and continually shaped through experience, context, and pedagogical decision-making (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Kelchtermans, 2017; Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Reflection plays a central role in this process, enabling teachers to surface, question, and revise their beliefs. This perspective informs my use of journaling and self-interviewing as tools to examine shifts in my thinking and practice while teaching the graphic memoir unit.

Finally, research on graphic novels and comics as complex multimodal texts highlights their capacity to support critical representation, inquiry, and literacy learning (Frey & Fisher, 2008; Low, 2015; Pantaleo, 2018, 2019; Meyer et al., 2018). This body of work frames graphic memoirs as rich and rigorous texts rather than supplementary or simplified forms of reading.

Together, these ideas help me make sense of my analysis of how my literacy beliefs and teaching identity shift as I integrate graphic texts into my ELA teaching in Hawai‘i.

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the research that informs this self-study. I focus on four main areas: (1) reflective practice and how teachers make sense of tensions and insights that emerge in their teaching, (2) multimodal literacy and how it challenges traditional definitions of literacy, (3)graphic texts as multimodal forms of expression and inquiry, and (4) teacher identity as an evolving aspect of professional practice. Together, these areas of research help me better understand how teaching a graphic memoir unit reshaped both my understanding of literacy and my identity as a middle school ELA teacher in Hawai‘i.

Reflective Practice

Reflection is often described as central to teachers' professional growth, especially when they adopt new or challenging pedagogies. Zeichner and Liston (2013) define reflective teaching as the ongoing examination of one's beliefs, instructional decisions, and ethical commitments. Rodgers (2002) adds that reflection helps turn experience into learning by making tacit assumptions visible and subject to change. Overall, these perspectives highlight how reflection creates space for teachers to question their thinking and make sense of their classroom experiences.

Research also shows how reflective practice supports both pedagogical and identity shifts. Schwarz (2020) found that teachers implementing multimodal curricula developed increased awareness of their biases toward print-based literacy and greater openness to diverse literacy practices. Larrivee (2008) demonstrated that reflective practice helps teachers identify tensions between their instructional decisions and their core values. Francis (2021) showed that reflective journaling enabled teachers to renegotiate their professional identities during

curriculum innovation. These studies helped me see reflection not just as a routine practice, but as something that can push teachers to reconsider long-held beliefs and adjust their professional identities as their pedagogy shifts.

For this reason, adopting multimodal practices is not only about changing instruction, it also involves rethinking identity. Reflection is the process through which teachers notice internal tensions, interpret new experiences, and imagine new roles for themselves as literacy educators. Reflective journaling, identity mapping, and self-interviewing serve as key tools for understanding how teaching graphic memoirs prompts shifts in my beliefs about literacy and my identity as a teacher.

Multi-Modal Literacy

Traditional print-centered models of literacy have often limited what counts as legitimate literacy in schools. Siegel (2012) argues that privileging print marginalizes learners whose strengths lie in visual, spatial, or embodied modes. Serafini (2014) similarly states that when alphabetic text is treated as the primary indicator of literacy, teachers' instructional repertoires are constrained, limiting students' opportunities to engage in rich interpretive work. These scholars highlight a systemic issue: when print remains the default measure of literacy, alternative modes of expression are often overlooked, narrowing the ways students can demonstrate their knowledge and ideas.

Multimodal literacy challenges these hierarchies by asserting that meaning-making occurs through the orchestration of multiple modes–such as written and spoken language, images, sound, movement, and spatial design—not solely through printed words (Jewitt, 2013; Kress, 2010). From this perspective, literacy is a design process in which learners select and

combine modes to communicate ideas. This way of thinking expands what counts as literacy and who is seen as a capable literacy learner.

Research studies also demonstrate the potential of multimodal approaches to support diverse learners. Chang and Asselin (2023) describe how multimodal transmediation, which is shifting ideas across modes, allowed a middle school student with learning disabilities to demonstrate understanding that traditional writing tasks obscured. Rowsell and Walsh (2015) likewise found that adolescents used multimodal resources to articulate insights that did not surface through written language alone, especially when exploring identity or abstract concepts. Altogether, these studies show how multimodal practices can surface layers of student thinking that print-based tasks may miss.

Graphic texts are one example of multimodal literacy, and have also been shown to support key comprehension strategies. Frey and Fisher (2008) found that the interplay of visual and linguistic information in graphic novels scaffolded prediction, inference, and summarization. Hammond (2020) showed that multimodal composition increased motivation and literacy engagement for reluctant middle school writers, who benefited from opportunities to express ideas visually. Pantaleo (2019) documented how analyzing visual design elements in students' multimodal compositions strengthened their metacognition and interpretive skills, suggesting that visual literacy is central—not peripheral—to meaning-making. These findings illustrate how graphic texts can deepen students' comprehension and engagement by inviting them to work across modes.

Across these studies, multimodal literacy challenges print-dominant assumptions and broadens the ways students demonstrate knowledge and ideas in ELA classrooms. Collectively,

the research shows that multimodal practices expand participation and make student thinking more visible in ways that print-based tasks may overlook. At the same time, the literature points to persistent tensions for teachers, who often navigate internalized beliefs about print-based rigor even as they acknowledge the value of multimodal expression. These tensions reveal a gap in the research regarding how teachers make sense of their shifting beliefs when adopting multimodal approaches. This gap directly informs my study, which examines how engaging in multimodal instruction reshapes my identity as a teacher and understanding of literacy.

Graphic Texts and Inquiry

Graphic texts offer a useful way to explore how multimodal literacy works in classroom practice. Research shows that graphic narratives, including comics and graphic memoirs, offer unique opportunities for representing complex experiences and engaging in critical inquiry. Low's (2015) ethnographic study of urban youth illustrates how students used comics to redesign and critique their social worlds, visually representing experiences of community, race, and schooling. Students who struggled with conventional writing emerged as highly capable authors when composing visually. Low's research highlights how visual storytelling can amplify students' voices and reveal abilities that traditional writing tasks sometimes mask. While Low's work focuses on urban youth contexts, research in Hawai'i contexts highlights how multimodal approaches can surface culturally grounded ways of knowing.

Meyer, Maeshiro, and Sumida (2018) found that "arting and writing" together allowed learners to surface cultural, ecological, and identity-based knowledge in ways that traditional writing alone could not. Their findings are particularly resonant in Hawai'i, where visual, embodied, and place-based ways of knowing are deeply valued. When put together, these

insights illustrate how multimodal work can bring forward culturally rooted, embodied understandings that traditional writing tasks tend to silence. This broader view of literacy is particularly relevant in Hawai‘i and underscores the need for instructional practices that reflect and respect local knowledge systems. One such example is the Hawaiian tradition of mo’olelo.

Mo’olelo is highly valued as a way of knowing and communicating, encompassing multiple forms of narrative that share history, identity, and place-based knowledge (Kana’iaupuni et al., 2017). In this way, mo’olelo aligns with multimodal teaching approaches to literacy. Incorporating opportunities for students to engage in storytelling through visual and narrative forms, such as graphic memoirs, allows them to participate in practices that are culturally grounded. This connection further highlights how multimodal instruction can go beyond traditional definitions of literacy while simultaneously honoring culturally sustaining pedagogies. Beyond Hawai’i-specific contexts, additional research further highlights the broader potential of graphic texts.

Other studies further highlight the potential of graphic texts. Pantaleo (2018) documented how elementary and middle school students used graphic novel composition to express nuanced emotional and social realities. Lent (2016) found that adolescents perceived graphic narratives as safe spaces to explore trauma, identity, and social critique. Chamberlain (2021) demonstrated that graphic memoirs supported multilingual learners in connecting personal narratives with academic literacy, allowing them to draw on linguistic and cultural resources that might otherwise remain undervalued. Together, these findings emphasize how graphic narratives can reveal forms of student insight and identity work that may not appear in conventional writing.

Overall, these studies position graphic texts as powerful tools for inquiry, identity

exploration, and critical representation. For teachers, facilitating this kind of work involves shifting from gatekeepers of traditional print norms to facilitators of multimodal inquiry. This pedagogical repositioning is closely tied to teacher identity as it requires educators to reconsider their assumptions about literacy, rigor, and student capability. These shifts are central to my study, which examines how teaching a graphic memoir unit prompts reflection on my own beliefs and identity as a literacy teacher.

Teacher Identity

Because these instructional shifts are deeply connected to how teachers understand their roles, it is important to consider research on teacher identity and reflective practice. Research on teacher identity demonstrates that identity is relational, contextual, and continually reconstructed (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Teachers' beliefs about literacy, learning, and students form a core part of this identity. Kelchtermans (2017) highlights the role of vulnerability and notes that identity shifts often occur during moments of pedagogical tension, when teachers' established beliefs are challenged. Altogether, these studies position teacher identity as a relational and reflective process shaped by ongoing negotiation between personal beliefs and professional contexts. As teachers encounter new forms of literacy instruction, they are prompted to question their assumptions and reconsider who they are as educators.

Studies also show how these shifts happen in practice. Day et al. (2020) found that teacher identity evolves through cycles of tension, reflection, and adaptation, particularly when teachers assume new responsibilities or adopt innovative practices. Cervetti et al. (2017) showed that implementing inquiry-based and multimodal literacy practices required teachers to reconceptualize their roles, shifting from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of

meaning-making. Morgan (2010) suggests that literacy teachers experience identity shifts as they negotiate institutional expectations and personal commitments to student-centered or critical pedagogy. Across these studies, identity development is portrayed as a dynamic process shaped by teachers' responses to new practices and the tensions these practices unveil. This is directly relevant to my self-study, as integrating graphic memoirs requires me to renegotiate my own beliefs about literacy and reconsider the kind of literacy teacher I am becoming. These identity shifts are further shaped by the specific cultural and educational contexts in which teachers work.

In Hawai‘i, teachers work within a context that includes rich cultural, linguistic, and visual knowledge systems. This context can heighten tensions between Western print-dominant literacy traditions and non-Western local ways of knowing. Teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit in this setting invites the teacher to reconsider assumptions about rigor, academic language, and what counts as success in literacy. Collectively, this research highlights the broader implications of these tensions for teaching practice and identity.

This body of research suggests that pedagogical innovations such as a graphic memoir unit are not just pedagogical decisions; they also serve to challenge and reshape teachers' beliefs about literacy and learning. These processes of reflection and identity negotiation form the core of the present study.

Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate my central research question: How does teaching multimodal texts change my perception of myself as a teacher of literacy? Supporting questions examine (1) the tensions and insights that emerge while teaching an eight-week multimodal graphic memoir unit, (2) the ways my reflections illustrate evolving beliefs about literacy and its purposes, and (3) how multimodal instructional approaches challenge my previously held assumptions about literacy.

Because the focus of this study is on my internal experiences, identity shifts, and reflective interpretations, a qualitative self-study design is appropriate for systematically examining my practice. This chapter describes the research design, role as the researcher, setting and participants, data collection procedures, analytic methods, and strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and rigor.

Self-Study Methodology

This research employs a self-study practitioner inquiry methodology, a qualitative approach in which teachers systematically examine their own practice to surface assumptions, dilemmas, and identity shifts (Kitchen, 2020; Loughran, 2004). Grounded in reflective practice, self-study centers the teacher's internal experiences as valid and essential sources of knowledge, making it well suited for investigating how my beliefs about literacy evolve during the implementation of a multimodal graphic memoir unit.

Self-study also aligns with Zeichner and Liston's (2013) characterization of reflective teaching as an ongoing process of interrogating one's beliefs, pedagogical decisions, and ethical

commitments. Because this study focuses on the tensions, reflections, and emerging understandings that arise in my own teaching, self-study offers the methodological structure needed to examine these experiences rigorously, transparently, and ethically.

Scope and Feasibility

The study is designed to be completed within an eight-week instructional period. All data will be from teacher-generated reflections, making the project feasible alongside full-time teaching. Additionally, the study qualifies for Exempt IRB (Institutional Review Board) Category 1 according to the university IRB office, as it involves the analysis of instructional materials and teacher reflections without collecting identifiable student data, the teacher serving as the only research participant.

Alignment With Purpose and Research Questions

Self-study is the most appropriate design for this project because:

- The research questions focus on my internal experiences, not student outcomes.
- Identity shifts occur through ongoing cycles of reflection, practice, and reinterpretation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).
- The graphic memoir unit itself is central to understanding how my beliefs about literacy are challenged and transformed.

Self-study also enables the iterative, reflective stance needed to interpret tensions and insights that surface while implementing multimodal literacy instruction.

Role as the Researcher

As the lead ELA teacher for students in grades 6–8, I serve simultaneously as the practitioner implementing the instructional unit and the researcher analyzing my own beliefs and instructional decisions.

This positionality provides several advantages, including:

- Deep contextual knowledge of my students.
- Connection that supports authentic reflection.
- Insider awareness of classroom dynamics.

However, it also introduces limitations, such as:

- Potential researcher bias.
- Emotional involvement in classroom events.
- Selective attention to moments that confirm or disrupt my beliefs.

To mitigate these limitations, I use reflexive writing and cross-checking of data sources to increase transparency and support trustworthiness (Brookfield, 2017). In addition to the positional considerations outlined above, the self-study design itself carries methodological advantages and limitations.

Advantages and Limitations of the Design

Advantages

Self-Study research offers several advantages for examining teacher identity and reflective practice (Francis, 2021;Loughran,2004), including:

- Enables in-depth exploration of teacher identity.
- Integrates reflective practice with teaching.
- Generates rich, nuanced data about internal processes.
- Is grounded in everyday teaching practice.

Limitations

As a self-study, this research also has some limitations (Loughran, 2024; Kelchtermans, 2017).

- Findings are not generalizable.
- Researcher bias is inevitable.
- Emotional proximity may shape interpretation.

These limitations are addressed through the strategies for trustworthiness and rigor described later in this chapter.

Setting and Participants

Setting

The study is completed in a public charter middle school in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, serving grades 6–8 and emphasizing project-based, place-based, and sustainability-oriented learning. The school community reflects the cultural diversity of Hawai‘i, including Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Asian, and multiracial students across a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Participants

Participants include students enrolled in my 6–8 grade English Language Arts class. Students are contextual participants, meaning their learning environment informs this self-study, but no identifiable student data is collected, analyzed, or reported.

Participant Selection

All students participate in the instructional unit as part of normal classroom learning. Because the research focuses exclusively on the teacher's reflections, no additional student recruitment or data collection occurs.

IRB Procedures

This study meets criteria for Exempt IRB Category 1, involving normal educational practices and non-identifiable teacher reflections. To ensure confidentiality:

- No student names or identifiable descriptors appear in the study.
- All data is stored in password-protected digital folders.

Data Collection Procedures

Instructional Intervention

The intervention is an eight-week graphic memoir unit designed to integrate visual narrative techniques with traditional literacy instruction. Lessons include:

- Analyzing mentor texts (e.g., *El Deafo*, *American Born Chinese*, Guts, etc.).
- Teaching visual grammar (panels and pacing).
- Modeling multimodal composition strategies.
- Supporting students in drafting short graphic memoirs.

Data Sources

The primary forms of data collected in this study include:

- **Identity Map**
    - An identity map is used in this study as a reflective and analytic tool to visually represent my beliefs, values, and assumptions about literacy over time.
    - This approach is grounded in research that conceptualizes teacher identity as dynamic, multifaceted, and continually shaped through reflection, experience, and moments of tension (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Keltchermans, 2017).
- **Daily Reflective Journals**
    - Recorded immediately following lessons.
    - Document tensions, surprises, ideas, and beliefs.
- **Post-Research Self-Interview**
    - Conducted at the end of the data collecting period to synthesize insights, belief and identity shifts, and overall mentality around multimodal teaching in an ELA classroom.

Data Collection Timeline

A week-by-week timeline outlines instructional focus and data collection activities:

Week	**Instructional Focus**	**Data Collected**
1	Introduction to graphic memoirs	Journal
2	Visual grammar & narrative structure	Journal
3	Identity and emotion in comic storytelling	Journal
4	Storyboarding sequencing and brainstorming	Journal
5	Drafting, conferencing, & revision	Journal
6	Drafting, conferencing & revision	Journal
7	Drafting, conferencing, & revision	Journal
8	Sharing & critique	Journal

Instructional Procedures

Instructional procedures include:

- Modeling visual analysis strategies.
- Teaching narrative and compositional elements.
- Facilitating work sessions.
- Guiding structured self-reflection, peer reviews, and one-on-one teacher and support teacher conferences.

These procedures ensure tight alignment between instructional events and data collection.

Data Analysis

Overview of Analytic Approach

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), appropriate for identifying themes related to identity shifts, tensions, and evolving literacy beliefs.

Coding Methods

The analysis used:

- Process coding (actions, instructional decisions).
- Emotion coding (feelings, tensions).
- Focused coding (refining categories).

  as described by Saldaña (2021).

Analysis Across Data Sources

Each data source will be analyzed using the thematic and coding approaches described above, with specific strategies applied to each type of data in order to examine how my beliefs as a literacy teacher evolved throughout the unit. Daily reflective journals are coded line-by-line using process coding and emotion coding (Saldaña, 2021), as these methods are well suited for capturing both my instructional decisions and internal reactions, tensions, and moments of uncertainty that are central to identity development. Instructional artifacts—including lesson plans and slide decks—will be analyzed through document analysis to identify patterns in my pedagogical decisions and to examine how those choices align with or challenge my beliefs. Together, these analytic processes will provide a coherent understanding of my identity as a literacy teacher developed through ongoing cycles of reflection, practice, and reinterpretation.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were used to enhance the study's methodological rigor:

- Reviewing journals.
- Reflexive journaling to surface positionality and assumptions.
- Audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme development.
- Context-rich explanations to support transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

These strategies strengthen dependability, credibility, and confirmability within a self-study framework.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological grounding of my study and showed how the components of research design, data collection, and analysis work together to help me understand how multimodal instruction shapes my growing identity as a literacy teacher. Using a self-study approach allowed me to slow down, look inward, and make sense of the tensions and shifts that surfaced while teaching the graphic memoir unit. The combination of journals, my identity map, and self-interview created a layered picture of my experience across the eight weeks. Through inductive thematic analysis, this approach allows me to examine these reflections systematically while staying open to what emerged. Finally, the strategies for trustworthiness helped me approach this work with honesty, transparency, and care. Together, these methodological choices form a strong foundation for the analysis that follows in the Findings chapter.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings from this self-study, which examined how teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit shaped my understanding of literacy and my identity as a literacy teacher. Data were collected through an identity map, visual representations of my beliefs and teacher identity created before and after the unit, post-lesson reflective journal entries, and a post-unit self-interview. Through an analysis of recurring patterns across the collected data, I identified tensions in my instructional practice and changes in my beliefs and in how I conceptualize literacy. These findings are rooted in my reflections and are presented as interpretations of my experiences throughout my teaching of the unit.

The findings shared in this chapter are organized into three main themes, which are directly connected to this study's research questions. These themes also align with key ideas from the literature, including multimodal literacy, reflective practice, and teacher identity. The three main themes are: tensions between print-based and multimodal beliefs, shifting understandings of literacy, and my evolving identity as a literacy teacher.

Tensions Between Print-Based and Multimodal Beliefs

One of the most prominent findings was the tension between my long-held beliefs about print-based literacy and my growing understanding of multimodal literacy. Although the unit was designed to focus on visual storytelling and graphic memoirs, my reflections commonly showed uncertainty about whether these forms of literacy met my expectations of academic rigor and supported students' literacy development.

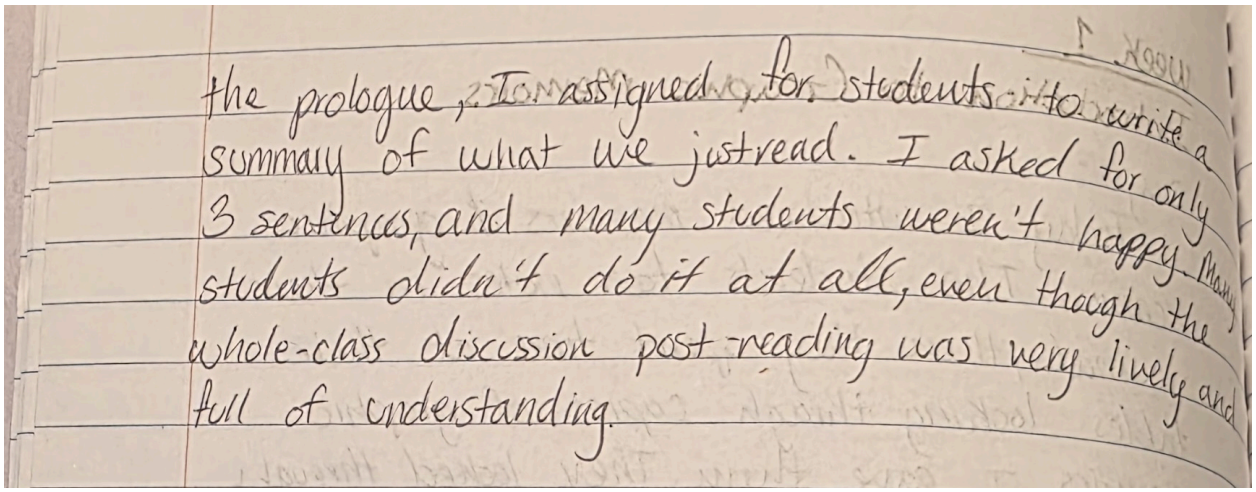
In an early journal entry, I wrote, "I wonder if I should have the students drill reading and writing exercises more before the next planned lesson." This reflects my hesitation in valuing multimodal work the same way that I did traditional writing. Although we engaged in warm-up

activities such as grammar practice, quick journal writing in class, and even occasional spelling or grammar quizzes, I still felt that we didn't do 'enough writing' during instruction. This tension was also evident in my instructional decisions.

At the beginning of this unit, I asked students to complete a post-chapter task of a paragraph summary to demonstrate comprehension of the book we were reading as a class, *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousefzai. However, I noticed this task was challenging for many students, and it didn't fully reflect their understanding of the text. In response to this, I adapted the assignment by asking students to create comic strips after each chapter instead.

Figure 1

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 1



These comic strips were to be of a single event that happened in the chapter, while following specific guidelines. The guidelines were that the comic strip must have 3-6 scenes, have at least two narrative sentences with proper spelling and grammar, and at least one scene that involves dialogue. As I assigned this after each chapter, I would occasionally increase the writing guidelines associated with the task, even if the students had shown clear comprehension of the reading by their visual storytelling. These moments suggest that my instructional decisions

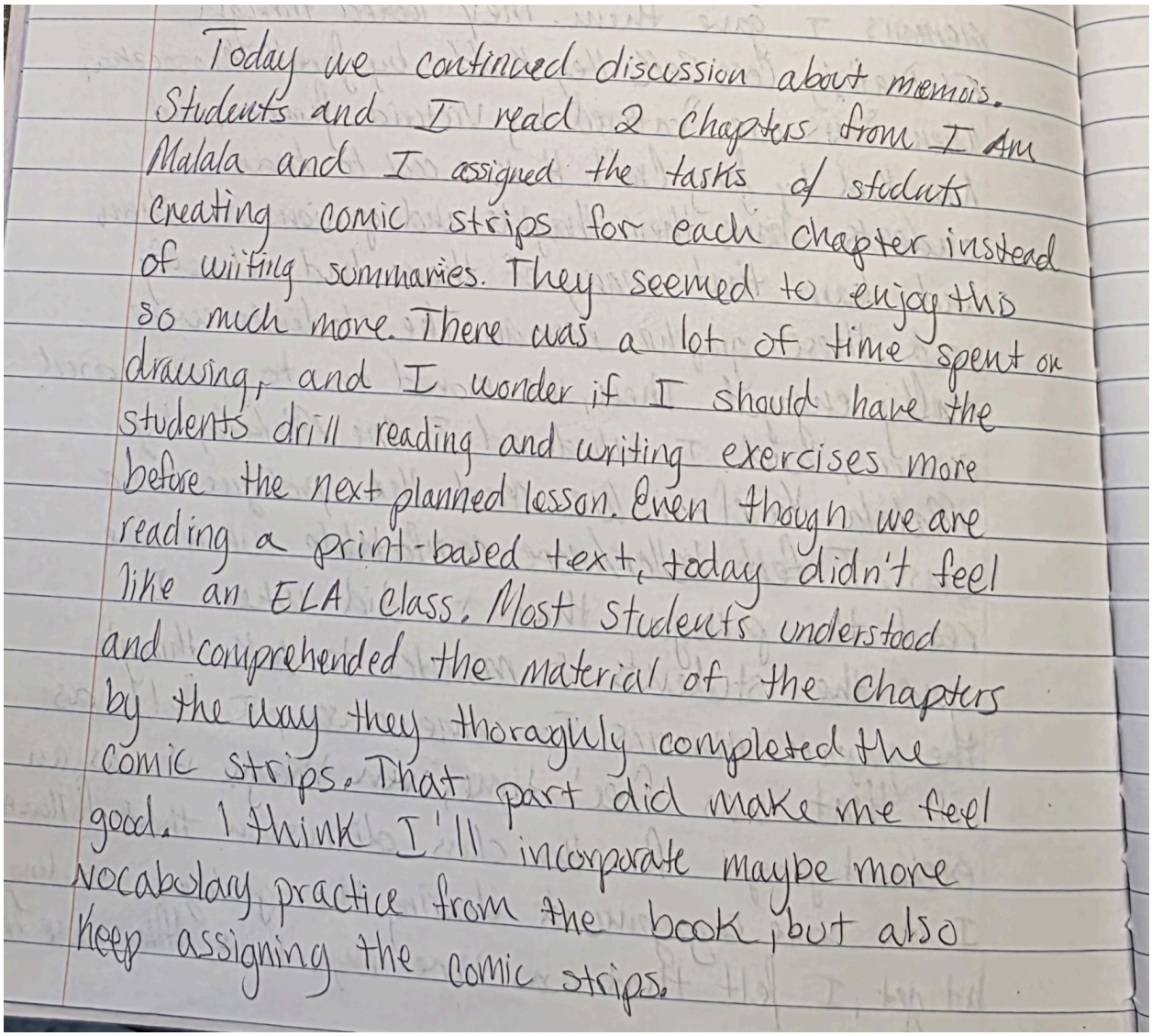
were still influenced by my internalized beliefs about print as the primary indicator of academic success.

This instructional decision increased student engagement significantly and allowed my students to showcase their comprehension through images, dialogue, and visual sequencing. Still, I questioned whether this was ‘too fun’ versus academically rigorous. I continued to feel the need to ‘push’ for more written text.

This tension was further evident in my decision to include a final written reflection as part of the graphic memoir project. At the conclusion of the unit, students were required to complete a one-page, three-paragraph reflection in response to guided questions about their process, choices, and feelings. Each paragraph had a minimum sentence requirement, reinforcing traditional print-based expectations within an otherwise multimodal unit. While I intended for this task to provide students with space to explain their thinking, it also revealed my continued reliance on print as a form of validation. Despite observing my students demonstrate deep understanding through visual storytelling, I still felt the need to include a structured writing component to confirm their learning. This moment highlights the persistence of my internalized beliefs about writing as the most legitimate evidence of literacy.

Figure 2

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 1

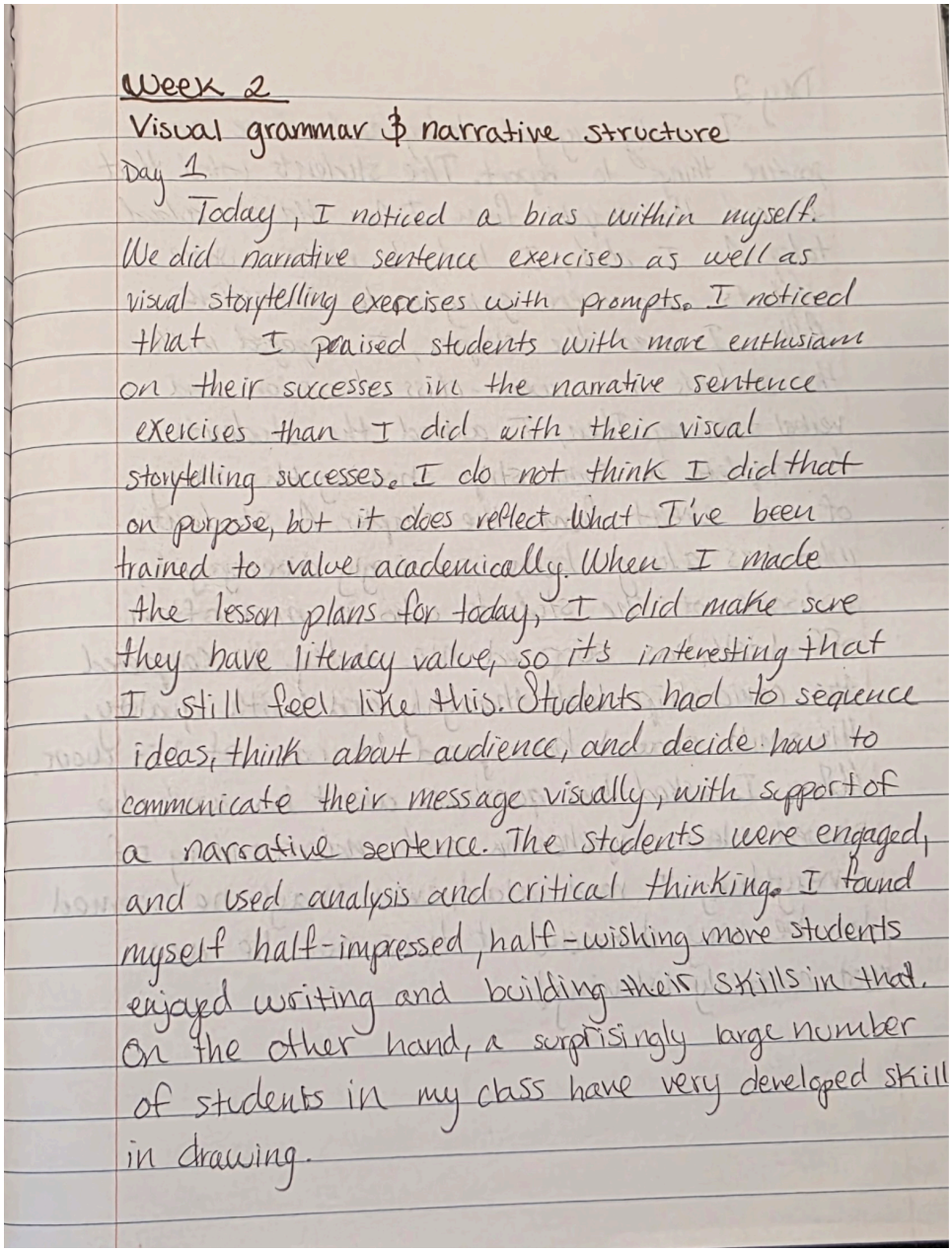


As I had made a decision to reduce traditional writing tasks and increase visual comprehension activities, I also incorporated more collaborative discussions to assess student understanding. After each chapter, students engaged in whole-class or small-group discussions, which allowed me to gauge their comprehension and engagement with the text. These discussions provided additional evidence that students understood the material, even when their

previous written responses were limited. Previous written responses, such as the post-chapter summary limited detail, whereas the whole-class or small-group discussions often lasted several minutes and revealed deeper comprehension.

Figure 3

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 2

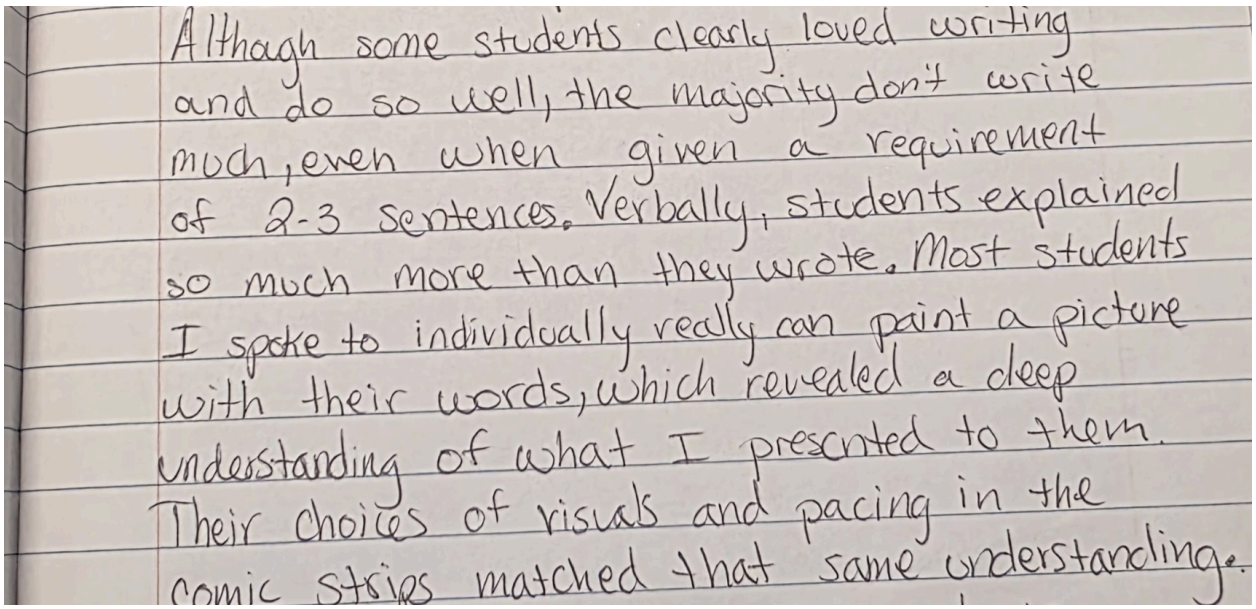


Week 2
Visual grammar & narrative structure
Day 1
Today, I noticed a bias within myself. We did narrative sentence exercises as well as visual storytelling exercises with prompts. I noticed that I praised students with more enthusiasm on their successes in the narrative sentence exercises than I did with their visual storytelling successes. I do not think I did that on purpose, but it does reflect what I've been trained to value academically. When I made the lesson plans for today, I did make sure they have literacy value, so it's interesting that I still feel like this. Students had to sequence ideas, think about audience, and decide how to communicate their message visually, with support of a narrative sentence. The students were engaged, and used analysis and critical thinking. I found myself half-impressed, half-wishing more students enjoyed writing and building their skills in that. On the other hand, a surprisingly large number of students in my class have very developed skill in drawing.

As the unit progressed, my reflections began to show a gradual reconsideration of these assumptions. During the beginning of the graphic memoir project, I noticed students were making complex decisions about pacing, layout, and emotional expression. Even though their writing output was minimal, the students demonstrated thoughtful composition decisions and a clear understanding of narrative structure.

Figure 4

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 3


Although some students clearly loved writing and do so well, the majority don't write much, even when given a requirement of 2-3 sentences. Verbally, students explained so much more than they wrote. Most students I spoke to individually really can paint a picture with their words, which revealed a deep understanding of what I presented to them. Their choices of visuals and pacing in the comic strips matched that same understanding.

During week four's storyboarding, I stated, "Today was the most silent class I've had with these students. For the entire independent work time, students were focused on their work. Many raised their hands to ask me various questions regarding their pacing and suggestions on whether certain expressions in dialogue were appropriate, or if they fit the guidelines. I had more

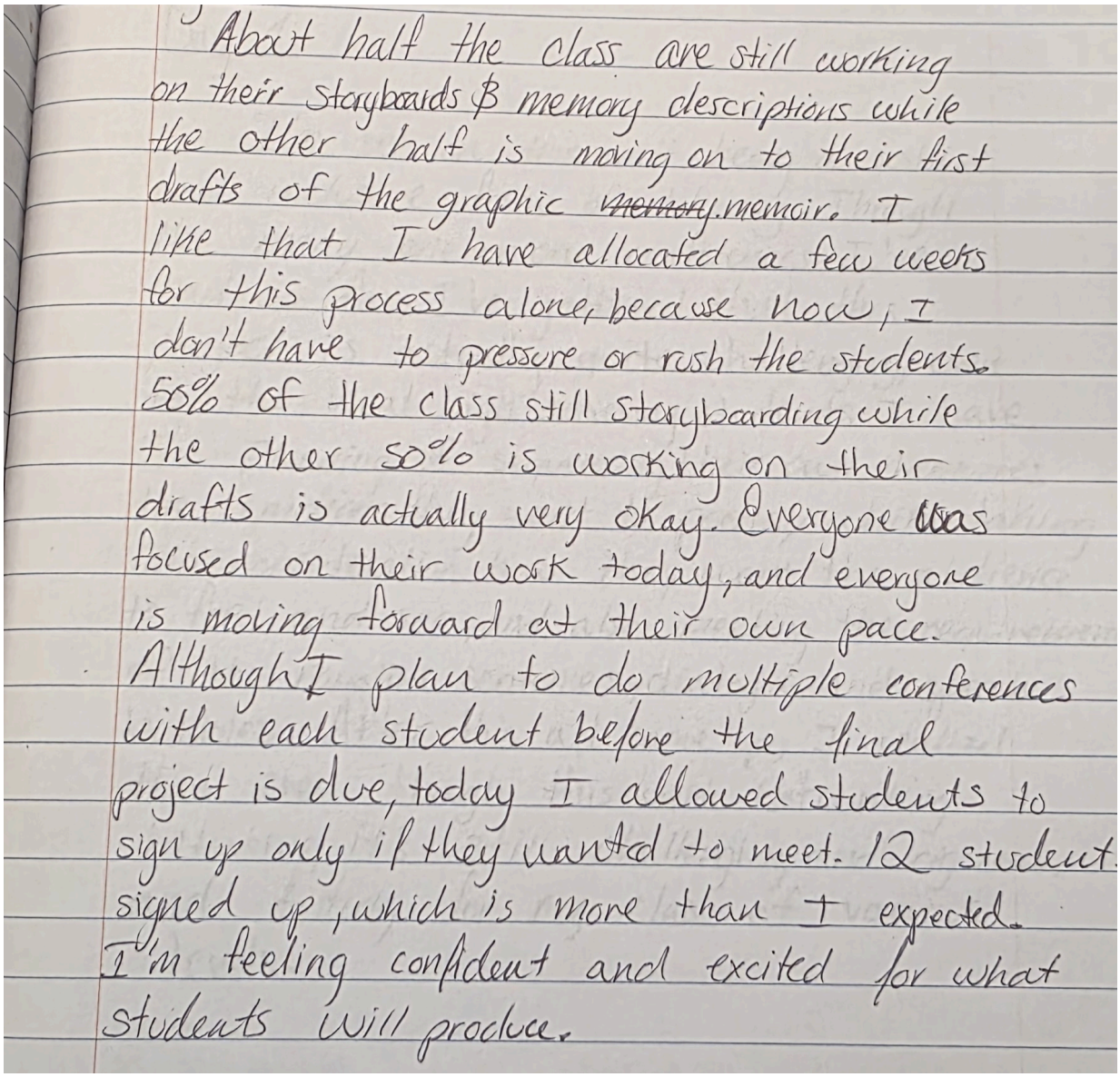
than five students ask me to review their narrative sentences to confirm if they were written well enough. I am impressed."

This moment reflects a turning point in my thinking about literacy and academic rigor. This was the first time I felt like I was actually doing the right thing as a teacher. My students were showing the ability to interpret and communicate ideas effectively by making appropriate decisions about pacing, layout, narrative structure and dialogue, and visual presentation. In addition, students were building important academic and life skills, time management.

This experience challenged my earlier assumption that more writing leads to more learning. I began to reconsider what counts as evidence of understanding, as I realized multimodal composition can require intentional planning, critical thinking, and deliberate design choices. The growing depth of my students' work was an incredible journey to witness. This finding connects directly to my first research question as it highlights both tensions and insights I felt while teaching this unit.

Figure 5

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 5



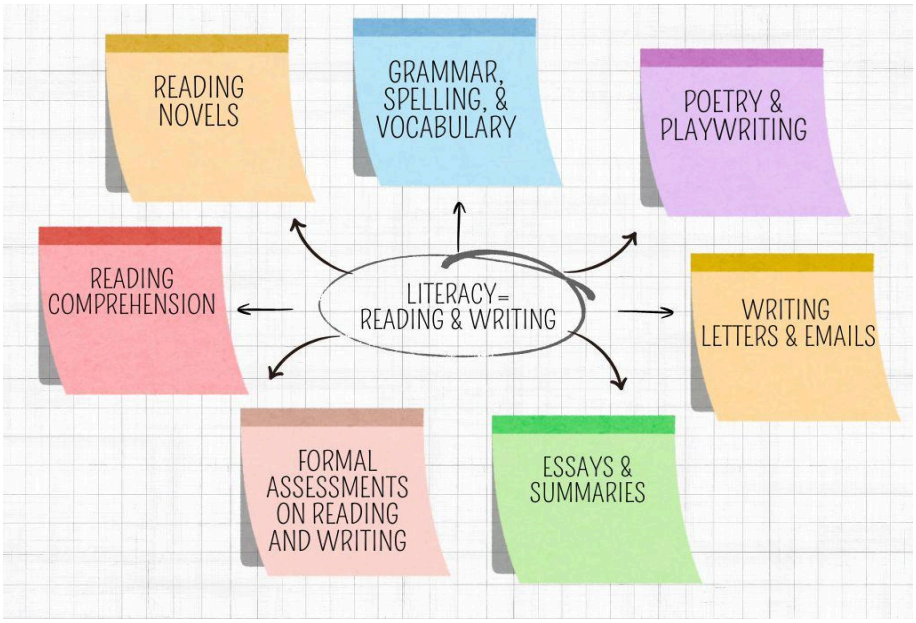
About half the class are still working on their storyboards & memory descriptions while the other half is moving on to their first drafts of the graphic ~~memory~~ memoir. I like that I have allocated a few weeks for this process alone, because now, I don't have to pressure or rush the students. 50% of the class still storyboarding while the other 50% is working on their drafts is actually very okay. Everyone was focused on their work today, and everyone is moving forward at their own pace. Although I plan to do multiple conferences with each student before the final project is due, today I allowed students to sign up only if they wanted to meet. 12 student signed up, which is more than I expected. I'm feeling confident and excited for what students will produce.

Shifting Understandings of Literacy

My second key finding was a shift in how I defined literacy. Prior to this unit, my understanding of literacy was tied to reading and writing print-based texts, with written expression being the primary indicator of comprehension and academic success.

Figure 6

Pre-Unit Identity Map



My pre-unit identity map reflects this print-based perspective, as it shows prioritization of reading and writing as the dominant forms of literacy, with no emphasis on visual or multimodal forms of expression. This reflects a primarily print-centered understanding. In addition, I find it interesting that I thought I was ‘open-minded’ by adding in poetry and playwriting as forms of literacy.

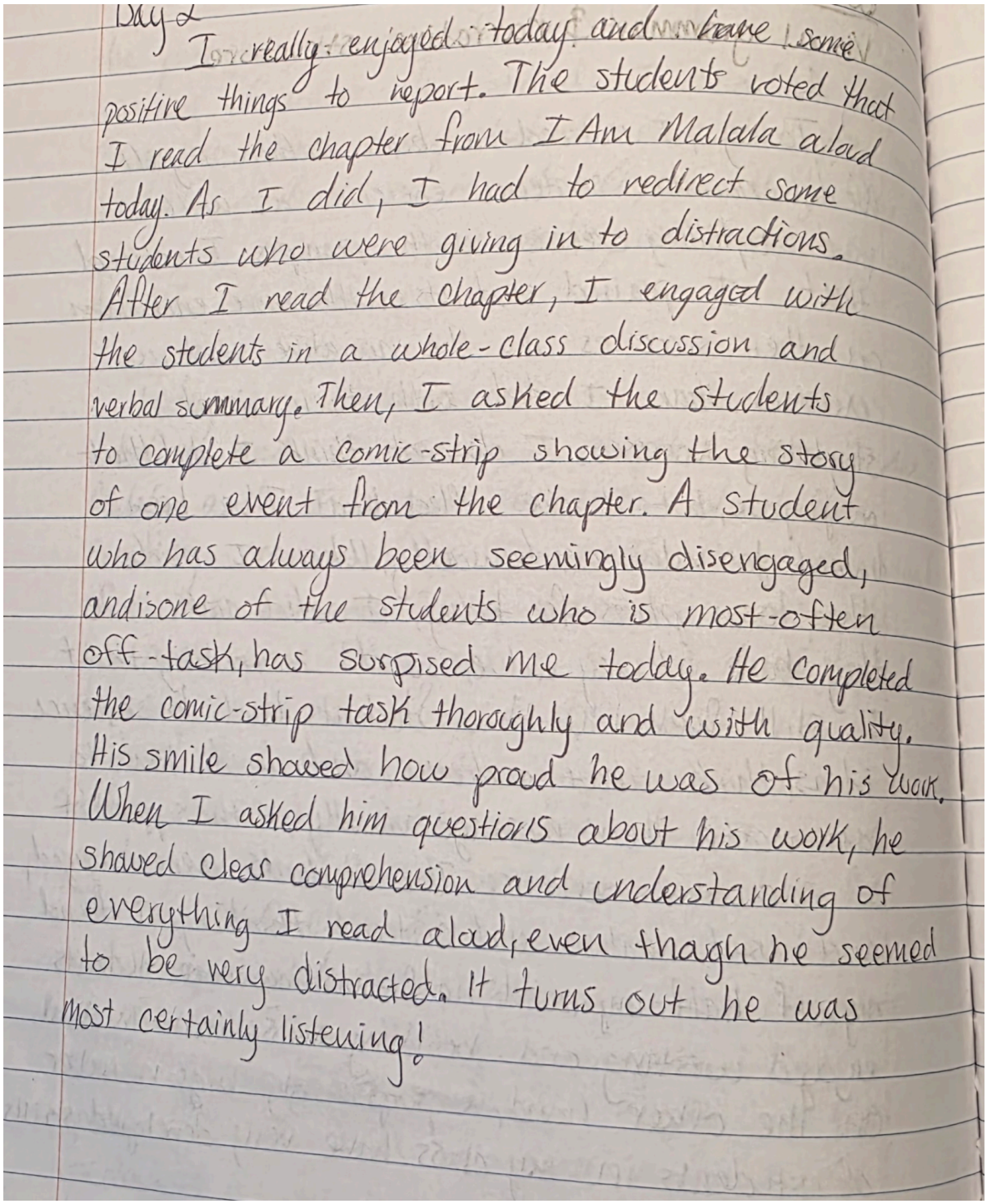
Through observing and reflecting on my teaching, I began to see literacy as a broader set of practices that include visual and multimodal forms of communication. This shift became more evident during a moment I wrote about in my week 2 journal entry:

"A student who has always been seemingly disengaged, and most often off-task, has surprised me today. They completed the comic-strip task thoroughly and with quality. The smile on this student's face showed how proud they were of their work. I went to speak with this student and ask questions about their comic strip, and they showed clear comprehension and confidence in their work."

This moment challenged my previous assumptions about what it means to communicate ideas and demonstrate comprehension. It also led me to reconsider who is considered a capable literacy learner. Although this student previously struggled to demonstrate understanding through traditional writing tasks and had below-grade-level standardized test scores, their ability to communicate through visual storytelling revealed a level of comprehension I don't believe I would have seen otherwise.

Figure 7

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 2


Day 2

I really enjoyed today and have some positive things to report. The students voted that I read the chapter from I Am Malala aloud today. As I did, I had to redirect some students who were giving in to distractions. After I read the chapter, I engaged with the students in a whole-class discussion and verbal summary. Then, I asked the students to complete a comic-strip showing the story of one event from the chapter. A student who has always been seemingly disengaged, and is one of the students who is most-often off-task, has surprised me today. He completed the comic-strip task thoroughly and with quality. His smile showed how proud he was of his work. When I asked him questions about his work, he showed clear comprehension and understanding of everything I read aloud, even though he seemed to be very distracted. It turns out he was most certainly listening!

The journal entry above, Figure 7, shows a key instructional decision I made in response to student preference: reading the chapter aloud. In the beginning of the transition into reading, I asked the class if they wanted to read independently, in groups, with partners, or follow along as I read. The majority explicitly requested that I read aloud, suggesting a need for supported access to the text. Whether it was due to varying reading levels, attention needs, or preference for auditory learning, I met their preferences and noticed a high level of engagement and comprehension, as evidenced by the student who appeared distracted but was able to demonstrate a clear and detailed understanding of the text through his comic strip and verbal responses. While *I Am Malala* includes some photographic images, it is not structured as a graphic text, therefore it does not provide the type of visual scaffolding that many students benefit from. The comic-strip task allowed students to translate a traditional print narrative into a visual format, which required them to analyze the text in order to properly sequence. The instructional choice of reading aloud not only aligned with student preference, but also supported their path to comprehension and expression.

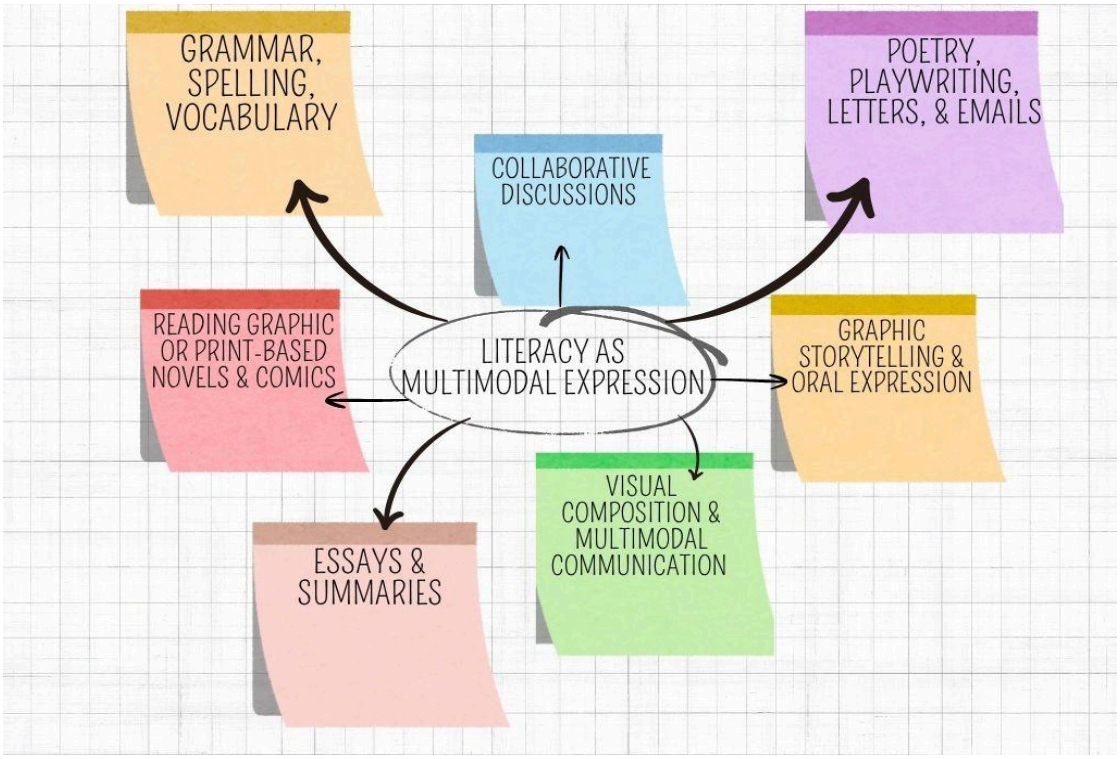
After school on this same day, I remembered a book that a student's mom gave me when she learned about my teaching of the graphic memoir unit. The book, *Arting and Writing to Transform Education*-An Integrated Approach for Culturally and Ecologically Responsive Pedagogy, which became a very useful tool of insight for me while teaching this unit. As I opened the book, I read something that resonated with what I had experienced in the classroom that day, "The sharing of stories gives students an authentic purpose to express their opinions and thoughts, to exchange ideas, and, as a result, learn more about themselves, each other, and their shared culture and place in the world. Building students' capacities to have something to say makes room for real participation and freedom for creative expression" (Meyer, et al., 2018).

This connection between my classroom experience and literature helped me to further expand my understanding of literacy. I began to see literacy as more than just print-based. I understood it to also be a variety of flexible and inclusive practices that allow students to communicate ideas, express identity, and demonstrate comprehension.

As the unit progressed and there were minimal traditional writing requirements while still maintaining a focus on comprehension, I noticed there was a significant increase in student engagement that became the new daily norm. More importantly, I witnessed students growing in their demonstrations of understanding in ways that were not always visible through written responses alone.

Figure 8

Post-Unit Identity Map

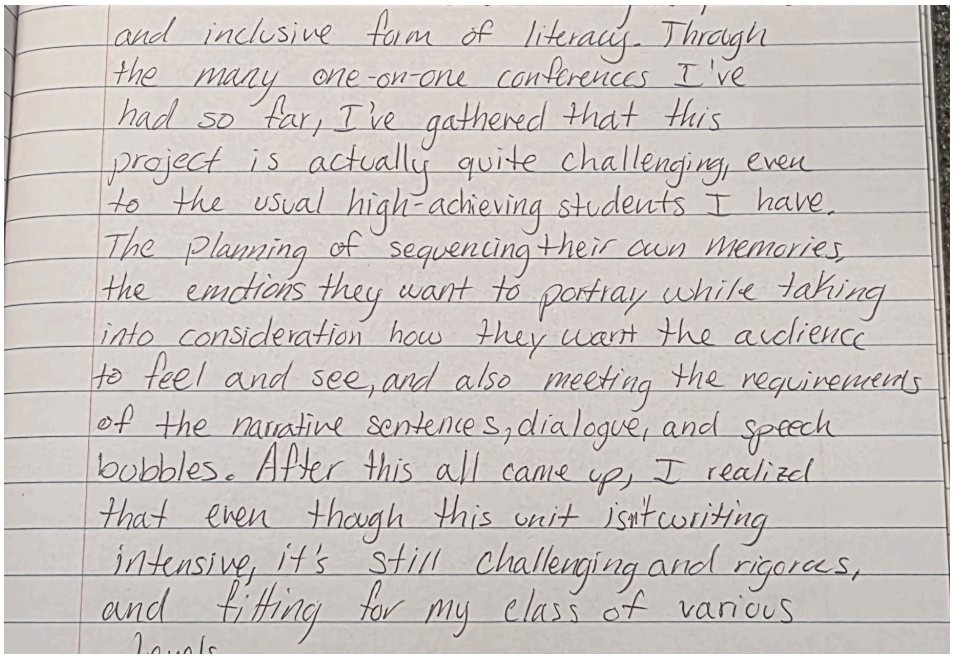


My post-unit identity map shows my expanded understanding of literacy. In contrast to the pre-unit map, this map includes visual storytelling, collaboration, graphic novels and comics, graphic storytelling, oral expression, visual composition, and multimodal communication. Although I still view all forms of literacy noted on the pre-unit as valid, I now have a broader understanding and acceptance of what literacy is and means. The additions to the identity map as seen in Figure 8 illustrate how my definition of literacy broadened over time to include multiple modes of communication.

This finding connects directly to my second research question as it highlights how my reflections revealed changes in my understanding of what literacy is and what it's for. Through this process, I moved from a print-based definition of literacy towards a more inclusive perspective that understands the value of multiple ways of communicating and demonstrating understanding.

Figure 9

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 6


and inclusive form of literacy. Through the many one-on-one conferences I've had so far, I've gathered that this project is actually quite challenging, even to the usual high-achieving students I have. The planning of sequencing their own memories, the emotions they want to portray while taking into consideration how they want the audience to feel and see, and also meeting the requirements of the narrative sentences, dialogue, and speech bubbles. After this all came up, I realized that even though this unit isn't writing intensive, it's still challenging and rigorous, and fitting for my class of various

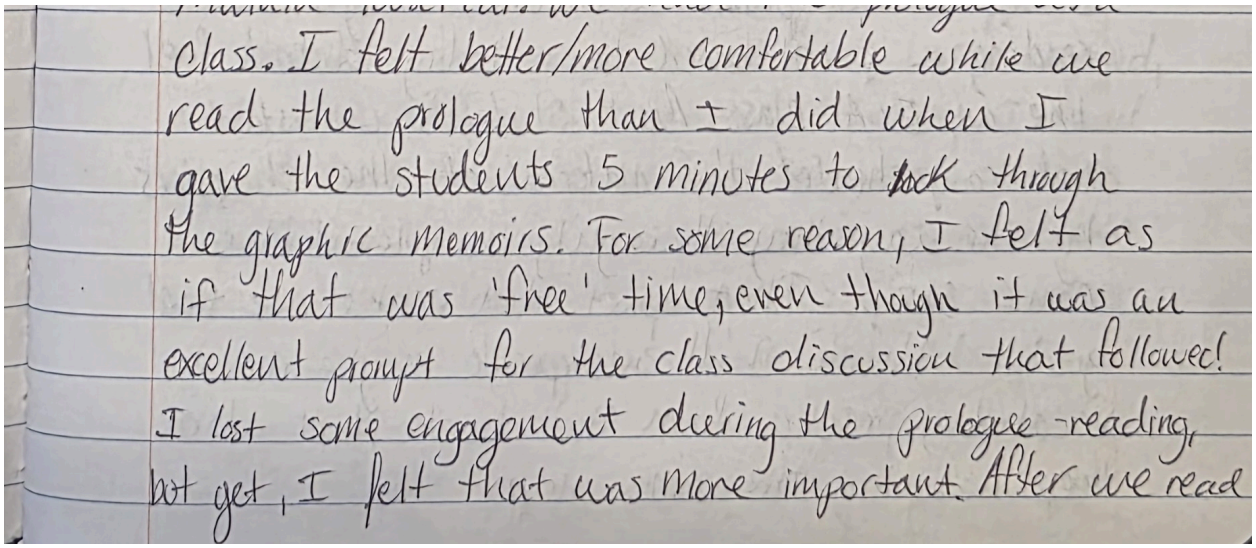
Evolving Teacher Identity

The third finding, changes in my identity as a literacy teacher, is what this section centers on. Throughout this unit, I re-examined my beliefs, instructional choices, and sense of confidence multiple times as I did my best to align my teaching practices with an expanded understanding of literacy. The growth was gradual as I explored tensions between my prior and emerging beliefs.

In the early reflections I wrote, I was more hesitant and doubtful of my instructional choices and didn't really believe the students' academic development would be thoroughly supported. In my reflective journal from week 2, I wrote about an internal bias that I recognized in class. I was praising students who did well on their narrative sentences with much more enthusiasm than I did those who did well on their visual storytelling. Externally, I was concerned that moving away from traditional writing tasks would negatively impact my students' literacy growth, and that I would regret attempting a graphic memoir unit. However, I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect and grow self-awareness in that action I took. I recognized that my students were engaging in equally complex forms of communicating ideas through visual composition by making intentional choices about sequencing, symbolism, dialogue, and narrative structure, which are all components of academic rigor. This reflection suggests that my identity as a literacy teacher was evolving towards a more expansive understanding of rigor.

Figure 10

Excerpt from Reflective Journal Week 1


class. I felt better/more comfortable while we read the prologue than I did when I gave the students 5 minutes to look through the graphic memoirs. For some reason, I felt as if that was 'free' time, even though it was an excellent prompt for the class discussion that followed! I lost some engagement during the prologue reading, but yet, I felt that was more important. After we read

Many moments during the unit challenged my original beliefs which caused me to reconsider my role in the classroom. For example, when students were demonstrating a very strong understanding through visual storytelling or collaborative discussion, I started wondering why writing was pushed so much as the primary indicator of learning. My students were learning a lot and proving it daily, with minimal traditional writing tasks. This experience moved me to reflect on how my instructional decisions were shaped by my beliefs surrounding literacy.

My identity as a teacher began to shift more quickly as I observed during my week 5 reflection, “Everyone is moving forward at their own pace…Although I plan to do multiple conferences with each student before the final project is due, today I allowed students to sign up only if they wanted to meet. 12 students signed up, which is more than I expected.” This experience increased my confidence significantly in multimodal instruction as the students,

including those who were very reluctant readers and writers earlier on in the semester, demonstrated a deep engagement and meaningful understanding.

Discussion

Summary

Guided by the central research question, "How does experimenting with visual texts change my perception of myself as a teacher of literacy?," the purpose of this study was to examine how teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit influenced my understanding of literacy and my identity as a literacy teacher. This study explored the tensions, insights, and shifts that emerged over the duration of an eight-week instructional unit. Three central themes were revealed through an analysis of my reflective journals. The themes were (1) tensions between print-based and multimodal beliefs, (2) shifting understandings of literacy, and (3) an evolving teacher identity.

At the beginning of my study, my understanding of literacy was fundamentally rooted in print-based reading and writing as the primary indicators of academic rigor. Throughout the graphic memoir unit, I experienced recurring tension between how I valued multimodal expression and feeling obligated to incorporate traditional writing practices. As students were demonstrating clear comprehension through visual storytelling, dialogue, and discussion, I still questioned whether reducing the written tasks was actually lowering academic expectations. These tensions reflected what literacy scholars have described as the persistence of print-dominant ideologies in classrooms (Serafini, 2014; Siegel, 2012), where writing is often positioned as the most legitimate form of demonstrating understanding.

Over time, however, my observations of increased student engagement and comprehension levels began to challenge my rooted assumptions. Students who previously struggled with traditional written summaries were able to communicate complex ideas through

comic strips and visual sequencing. These experiences provided concrete evidence that expression and communication go beyond written language and involve the integration of visual, spatial, and linguistic modes (Jewitt, 2013; Kress, 2010). This shift aligns with research suggesting that multimodal practices can make student thinking more visible and accessible (Meyer et al., 2018; Pantaleo, 2019).

The biggest shift for me was the transformation of my identity as a literacy teacher. From initially viewing my role primarily as a teacher of traditional literacy, I began to view my role as supporting students as they expressed their understanding through multimodal forms such as comics and graphic narratives. This shift was gradual, but led to a more flexible and inclusive understanding of literacy and teaching.

My post-unit self-interview provided additional opportunities for reflection and deeper insight on who I am now in comparison to who I was as a literacy teacher. Teaching English abroad is very different from teaching ELA in a classroom setting in the United States.I did not feel consistently inspired or motivated as an ELA teacher during the past few years. I felt as if I was a boring teacher because I rarely had high engagement in my ELA classes. Even though reading and writing were and are things I still enjoy myself, teaching these subjects to reluctant readers or writers didn't suit my energy well.

In one of my self-interview responses, I state, " Before this unit, I saw myself solely as a teacher of reading and writing. Now, I see my role as helping students communicate their ideas appropriately in multiple ways, not just through written text." This statement highlights how my understanding of literacy and teaching had significantly transformed over the course of this graphic memoir unit. I now feel more confident and well-rounded as a teacher. In this same

interview, I also reflected on my approach to assessment, as I have begun to value a wider variety of forms of student expression as valid evidence of understanding.

As I observed students demonstrate understanding through multimodal composition, I began to question why writing had been positioned as the primary indicator of learning. My evolving perspective required me to do many moments of reconsideration of how I support and assess student learning. I now have adopted a more flexible and responsive approach to teaching literacy due to the findings from this unit.

Ultimately, this finding shows how my identity as a literacy teacher developed through reflection, experience, and engagement with new pedagogical approaches. Contributing to this transformation were the combination of reflective journaling, visual mapping, self-interview data, the tensions I experienced, the insights gained from observing my students, and my willingness to reconsider my long-held beliefs about literacy shaped my identity's evolution. These findings connect directly to my third research question, as it highlights how adapting multimodal teaching practices influenced my identity as a literacy teacher.

Many of my students had previously struggled to demonstrate comprehension through traditional reading and writing tasks, and were often positioned as underperforming, largely based on standardized test scores. During the graphic memoir unit, the same students demonstrated high engagement, confidence, and the ability to communicate ideas through visual storytelling, dialogue, and collaborative discussion. In the unit prior to the graphic memoir unit, the students who historically produced minimal written responses were able to express complex interpretations of the text, *I Am Malala*, through images, sequencing, and multimodal

composition. These observations suggest that traditional print-based assessments may not fully capture the capabilities of learners.

Providing opportunities for multimodal expression allowed these students to participate more fully and demonstrate understanding in ways that aligned with their strengths. This finding reinforces the importance of expanding definitions of literacy to create more equitable learning environments, especially for students whose abilities are not reflected in standardized measures of achievement.

An important question that emerged from this study is whether graphic comics and memoirs, or other multimodal approaches, can serve as a stepping stone to more formal writing practices. While this study did not directly measure students' development in formal writing, my observations suggest that multimodal composition can support foundational literacy skills that are transferable to written expression. As my students engaged in visual storytelling, they demonstrated an understanding of narrative structure, sequencing, dialogue, and audience awareness, skills that are necessary for effective writing. In addition, the increased engagement and confidence that they showed may serve as an entry point for reluctant writers. Rather than being seen as separate practices, my findings suggest that multimodal approaches may complement and support the development of formal writing skills over time.

Limitations

As a self-study, this research is limited in scope and is not generalizable. The findings are based on my personal experiences within a single classroom and are shaped by my interpretations. In addition, this study relied primarily on teacher-generated data. This study does not include direct student data. The duration of this study is also relatively short, which limits the

ability to examine long-term changes in my teaching practice and identity. Despite these limitations, this study still provides valuable insight into how a literacy teacher identity develops through reflection and multimodal literacy practices.

Implications for Practice

This study suggests three key implications for teaching practice. First, educators should broaden their definitions of literacy to include multimodal forms of communication. Instruction should intentionally incorporate visual, oral, and collaborative modes alongside traditional reading and writing tasks.

Second, teachers should critically examine assumptions about academic rigor. Writing should not serve as the sole measure of student understanding. Teachers should consider multiple forms of evidence when assessing students' literacy learning, especially through multimodal forms of expression.

Third, multimodal teaching approaches can increase engagement and expand opportunities for demonstrating understanding. This is important for students who have historically struggled with print-based literacy tasks, as it allows for more equitable access to learning.

Implications for Practice in Hawai'i Contexts

In Hawai'i, these implications are significant given the linguistic and cultural diversity of the students. Hawai'i is widely recognized as one of the most ethnically diverse states in the United States, with populations of Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Classrooms across the state include students with a wide range of language backgrounds including Hawaiian Pidgin, ʻōlelo Hawaiʻi, and other languages such as Japanese, Tagalog, Ilocano, Chuukese, Marshallese. Nearly one in four

residents in Hawai'i speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). This linguistic and cultural diversity highlights the need for instructional approaches that are responsive and inclusive in how students access and demonstrate learning.

Broadening definitions of literacy to include multimodal forms of communication aligns with culturally responsive teaching practices in Hawai'i which value storytelling, visual expressions, and oral traditions, such as the practice of mo'olelo. As stated by Kana'iapuni et al. (2017), mo'olelo serves as a vital way of transmitting knowledge, history, and identity through narrative while often incorporating visual and oral elements. Using multimodal tasks as instructional tools, such as graphic memoirs or visual storytelling, creates opportunities for local students to draw from their narrative traditions as well as their own lived experiences as part of the process. Not only does this approach support comprehension, but it also supports student voice and identity.

Additionally, rethinking academic rigor is necessary in Hawai'i contexts, as standardized, print-based evaluation methods can limit equitable access for diverse learners. Providing multiple means of action and expression allows educators to assess student learning more equitably (Meyer et al., 2018). Meyer et al.(2018) also further argue that integrating artistic and multimodal forms of expression in Hawai'i classrooms serves as a culturally sustaining practice that expands how literacy and academic success are defined. Recognizing forms of expression that are rooted in local culture, such as mo'olelo, further expands what counts as literacy and what could be considered rigorous academic work.

These expanded views of literacy are also reflected in other cultural practices in Hawai'i and the broader Pacific region. For example, hula functions as a form of embodied storytelling in which chant, movement, and expression communicate narrative, place, and identity (Watts,

2015). Similarly, Polynesian tattooing traditions, such as Samoan tatau or Māori tā moko, encode personal genealogical stories through symbolic visual design on the body (Gell, 1997; Mallon & Pereira, 2010; Te Awekotuku, 2007). These practices demonstrate that meaning-making can occur through movement, imagery, and cultural symbolism, not solely through written text, further supporting the need to broaden definitions of literacy in classroom contexts (Kress, 2010).

Within this context, student-centered and culturally sustaining practices are essential. Providing space for students to engage in multimodal forms of storytelling allows them to draw from their identities and lived experiences, aligning with the cultural significance of mo'olelo in Hawai'i. When students are given more opportunities to tell their own stories through multiple modes, classrooms become more inclusive and equitable while also honoring diverse ways of knowing.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should examine how multimodal literacy instruction impacts not only student comprehension and engagement, but also identity development and sense of belonging across diverse educational contexts. Incorporating student voices through interviews, analysis of student work and various forms of assessment would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how learners experience and develop skills through multimodal approaches.

Additionally, further research should explore how multimodal literacy practices can support culturally sustaining and trauma-informed pedagogies, especially for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. This is relevant in global contexts, including work with immigrant, refugee, and displaced youth, where traditional print-based literacy models may not fully capture the students' knowledge or lived experiences.

Expanding this line of inquiry across international contexts could inform more inclusive and adaptable literacy frameworks, with implications for curriculum design, assessment practices, and educational policy changes. This work has the potential to challenge dominant definitions of literacy and contribute to more equitable education systems that recognize multiple ways of knowing and communicating.

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to explore how teaching a multimodal graphic memoir unit reshaped my understanding of literacy and my identity as a teacher. Through reflective journaling, identity mapping, and a self-interview, I examined the tensions, insights, and shifts that emerged throughout this instructional experience. My findings revealed three key themes: ongoing tensions between print-based and multimodal beliefs, shifting understandings of literacy, and an evolving teacher identity.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of broadening traditional definitions of literacy and academic rigor. While print-based reading and writing will always be valuable, they should not serve as the main indicators of student understanding or ability. Multimodal approaches provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage, express ideas, and demonstrate comprehension in ways that reflect their strengths and identities.

This study also highlights that multimodal teaching approaches are not just a pedagogical shift, but also create opportunities for shifts in teacher identity. As I engaged in my multimodal graphic memoir unit, I was consistently challenged to reconsider my long-held beliefs about literacy, rigor, and my role in a classroom. Now at the end of the study, I can say that I have developed a more inclusive and flexible understanding of literacy instruction.

In the local context of Hawai'i, this work is especially relevant. Cultural, linguistic, and storytelling traditions such as mo'olelo play a significant role in how knowledge is shared and understood. Multimodal approaches can help create more equitable and meaningful learning environments.

Ultimately, this study suggests that expanding literacy beyond print is about broadening the ways students are invited to participate, communicate, and be recognized as capable learners. As educators continue to explore multimodal teaching approaches, ongoing reflection should remain essential for aligning instructional practices with evolving understandings of literacy, equity, and student potential as literate citizens.

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