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Incorporating Graphic Novels and Comics into Library Instruction

Elizabeth Downey

Librarians have led the charge in collecting and promoting comics and graphic novels in their institutions. They publish books, journal articles and blogs on the topic, make collection development decisions as liaisons, and work directly with faculty to incorporate comics into lesson plans in several disciplines, from history and literature to social sciences and the STEM fields. While academic libraries have done a great job promoting their graphic novel collections for other disciplines, they may miss the opportunity to look inward and direct the use of these resources to support their own reference services and teach valuable research skills. How can we use comics to promote ourselves, the services we offer, and the skills researchers need to be successful? This paper will discuss the current literature on how graphic novels can be incorporated into library instruction and information literacy, and examine several examples of comics created to promote library services, teach research strategies, and supplement information literacy initiatives.

Defining Graphic Novels for Instructional Needs

Over the last several years graphic novels have held a steady presence in the library and education literature, and several definitions have evolved. The term "graphic novel" is actually a misnomer, since "novel" implies a work of fiction, and so many types of factual, nonfiction information can be imparted in the graphic novel form. This is why it is so commonly referred to as a genre. McCloud sees it as "artform...like a vessel which can hold any number of ideas or images" (6). Chute (2008) tosses out the term "graphic novel" completely, preferring the term "graphic narrative" defined as "a book-length work in the medium of comics" (453). As Carter concludes, "Much of the confusion in calling sequential

art narratives a genre rather than a form, format, or medium may be contributed to the novelty the form holds for many or to a lack of background knowledge and/or a lack of respect for those... that have taken it seriously for generations and have already established a vocabulary that has yet to meet a larger audience (22). Therefore, a more accurate term to describe graphic novels and comics would be a *format*. When we refer to graphic novels as a format, and not just a genre, this expands not only the definition of the term but the possibilities of their use as a tool for instruction. Will Eisner suggests:

> In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When they are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language --a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of Sequential Art (Eisner 8).

When they began to be promoted for use in classroom assignments, the focus was primarily in humanities areas, such as literature and history, which is why the "genre" label stubbornly stuck. Comparative exercises pairing graphic novels with "traditional" texts include Barbara Brown using *Maus* with *Light in August*, and Carter pairing *The Scarlett Letter* and *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom*. Educators have used *Persepolis*, *A.D. New Orleans After the Deluge*, *Alan's War* and *The 9/11 Report* for both analysis exercises and to teach about social issues. But in the last few years there has been heavier use in the social science and STEM fields, and the argument for using the term "genre" falls apart as the form expands beyond the previous humanities restrictions. *The Stuff of Life* teaches the specifics of genetics via an alien researcher looking to save its species;

Who Killed Professor X? is a murder-mystery that incorporates the history of mathematics with actual math problems. Libraries collect and promote the use of these to appeal to students and support teachers in their curricular goals. The logical next step for libraries is to use the graphic novel format to teach and promote library skills, and beyond that, information literacy skills.

Comics and Information Literacy

A graphic narrative, whether it is a full-length comic or a three panel strip, can be used to teach information literacy skills, whether on its own or as part of a one-shot in-class session, an online tutorial, a webinar, or a one-on-one demonstration by a reference librarian. *Information literacy* is defined by the National Forum on Information Literacy as "the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand" (infolit.org). Information literacy goes beyond traditional bibliographic or "library instruction," in that the skills are transferable to everyday uses for "lifelong learners" and are not limited to educational settings.

The need to teach information literacy skills has become more pronounced in an increasingly information- and technology-rich environment. Thanks to organizations such as the American Association of School Libraries (AASL) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) developing standards in this area, librarians have by default been tasked with the responsibility of promoting these skills in the 21st century student. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards in Higher Education consist of five basic standards that can be summed up as 1) determine the need, 2) access the information, 3) evaluate, 4) use for a specific purpose, and 5) use information ethically and honestly. These

standards also have suggested performance indicators and outcomes, of which comics fit into many.

Hoover makes "the case for graphic novels" in bibliographic and information literacy instruction by looking at the multiple modes of literacy and how graphic novels touch on those many areas, particularly media literacy, multimodal literacy, visual literacy, and information literacy. He explains that Eisner's statement about the "'grammar' of Sequential Art" gives us a "set of conventions" that comics follow. Readers can then employ information literacy skills to guide themselves through those conventions. This process is what Hoover calls *decoding*, or "the act of interpreting and applying these conventions when reading a graphic novel" (178). Framed in terms of information literacy, graphic novels are information sources, and the act of decoding comics consists of the same standards of "accessing, evaluating, and synthesizing" the information. For example, a student could demonstrate Outcome 3.2.B., "analyzes the structure and logic of supporting arguments or methods" by explaining comic elements described by Scott McCloud (panels, gutters, icons) and then decipher their meaning in another comic (179).

Use Traditional Graphic Novels and Comics to Teach Information Literacy Standards. Hoover lays out several ways that existing graphic novels can be used to teach student outcomes spelled out in ACRL's Information Literacy Standards in addition to decoding. To teach students about the differences between scholarly and non-scholarly materials, have them select a graphic novel and then find and compare reviews, one each from a scholarly and a popular source. Developing an annotated bibliography based on a graphic novel (or a convention or genre) exercises skills in developing a research question, strategizing a search, and recording results. Those same skills can be cultivated in a "fact-

checking" exercise using a non-fiction graphic novel (182). Having students translate a textual source into a comic format requires them to demonstrate not only paraphrasing but citation skills and an understanding of academic honesty. Comparing a graphic novel with its film adaptation can illustrate how reading a comic versus watching a director's interpretation of the same material can alter meaning (183).

Commission Your Library's Own Comic with In-House Resources. When Matt Upson was the Director of Library Services at McPherson College in 2011, graphic novels and comics were one of many tools he used to draw students into Miller Library. Being the sole librarian also gave him insight of just how little undergraduates knew about research, as he handled the majority of instruction sessions and reference inquiries (p. 391). Looking for an inventive way to teach information literacy skills on a budget, he teamed with Mike Hall, a student and library assistant with a background as a professional cartoonist. Together they created *Library of the Living Dead*, using a zombie apocalypse theme to frame the teaching of library research skills.

The comic quickly went viral and as of May 2012 had recorded over 2 million downloads (http://www.scribd.com/doc/46603776/Upson-Resume); impressive when one considers enrollment at McPherson is merely 600 students. The comic addresses Standard Two of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards, and includes modules on the Dewey Decimal System, interlibrary loan, strategizing searches and using online resources such as the catalog (392). The viral popularity of the comic also brought unintended but positive PR to the small college; this reflects the significance of a school's library in faculty and student recruitment and retention, as emphasized in ACRL's 2011 report, *Value of Academic Libraries* (393).

After Upson and Hall reported on the success of their comic at the Kansas Library Association conference, librarians from KSU-Salinas and Kansas Wesleyan University partnered to create their own comic. They surveyed students to gauge interest before moving forward and found a majority positive response; they used ComixPress for the print version and Issuu to provide online access and keep statistics. *Legends of the Library Ninjas* debuted during the campus welcome week in August 2012 and was incorporated into the "Freshman University Experience" courses for both campuses. Post-assessment was overwhelmingly positive; most students were able to exhibit successful use of Boolean operators, recognize the online catalog and interlibrary loan. They also said the comic was "awesome" or "pretty cool" and that they would use it again (Schwartz, 2012).

While Upson and Hall's works are primarily meant to be a general introduction to library services and not targeted to a particular class or population, two librarians at Texas Tech created a graphic novel to specifically supplement a for-credit research course. The graphic novel covered various research techniques and strategies. In addition to the graphic novel, the class consisted of PowerPoint slides accessible to the students, a traditional lecture, and short tutorial videos made with the website Xtranormal. The goal of using all of these varied tools was to target the many different learning styles of the students, and an end-of-term class evaluation was conducted via Survey Monkey (Syma and Weiner, 2012).

But what if you don't have a graphic designer or cartoonist at your institution? The work can always be contracted out. On the heels of *Library of the Living Dead*, Hall and Upson found more demand for library-oriented comics. Though Upson moved to Emporia State University's library system, he continued his collaborations with Hall, who now operates Atomic Raygun Comics (http://www.cmichaelhall.com/index.html). In addition to

traditional comics and art, Hall works with Upson and colorist Dustin Evans to create educational comics commissioned by public and academic libraries, collaborating with librarians to meet the specific and anticipated needs of their patrons.

Use Online Comic Creators. If your library is on a tight budget, or looking for more of a quick tutorial-per-task approach, a cheap alternative is to use one of the many comic creation tools available online. These interactive sites contain comic strip templates, clip art databases and text generators for users to create their own graphic narratives. Some are primarily targeted to teaching professionals and hosted by education and literacy organizations. ArtisanCam Super Action Comic Maker, Make Belief Comix, and other free online tools have been used in classrooms by students to create storyboards and sequential narratives (Graham, 6). The International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English host a "Comic Creator" at their site, ReadWriteThink.org, along with suggested lesson plans to pair the tool with. Libraries can use these to create short tutorials about using library services, such as how to locate eBooks, refine a research topic, or place holds on materials and have them sent to other branches (Fisher).

Conclusion

So once a library has a comic (or a series of comic strips), what are the next steps? First, the comics won't promote themselves, so make them available online and be sure to post links (or the actual images) on your library's webpage, research guides or social media accounts. Also publicize them with your faculty; encourage them to incorporate them into their course management pages, particularly if there is a research or academic integrity component to the course. And use them in library instruction, particularly the smaller comic

strips; add them to online tutorials or PowerPoints, put them in handouts, and be sure to ask for faculty and student feedback on them when they evaluate the course in post-assessment. In summary, there are already success stories of using comics to teach and promote library skills and services. As information literacy education becomes more vital, libraries should use every tool available to them, and graphic novels are uniquely suited for the task.

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