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Text, Image, Story: Using Photo Comics for Instruction, Promotion, and Participation in the Academic Library

Matt Upson

Alex Mudd

Kael Moffat

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Text, Image, Story: Using Photo Comics for Instruction, Promotion, and Participation in the Academic Library

MATT UPSON
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS
mupson@emporia.edu

ALEX MUDD
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS
amudd@emporia.edu

KAEL MOFFAT
Emporia State University
Emporia, KS
kmoffat@emporia.edu

Abstract

In response to the growing call for authentic learning and content creation in the information literacy setting, librarians at Emporia State University have created assignments and activities that utilize an iOS app called *Comic Life* to create photo comics. Students in a for-credit course created photo comics as information literacy narratives, while First Year Seminar students worked to build library guides. These activities encourage honest, meaningful reflection by students and allow them to demonstrate metaliteracy skills in an engaging and creative manner and can allow for both individual and group-created content. Students at Emporia State University have expressed high levels of satisfaction and engagement when participating in these activities.

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Introduction

Comics have certainly come a long way since cheap ink, rough pulp paper, and saddle stapling. They and their offspring, graphic novels and manga, have become not only key players in the publishing world, but also standbys in library collections, offering not only entertainment, but genuine understanding of important and complex topics like philosophy, history, and politics. Icon Books, for example, publishes a *Graphic Guide* series on topics as far flung as the philosophy of Michel Foucault or the economics of John Maynard Keynes. Comics have even made their way into corporate America. Webb, Balasubramanian, Ó Broin, and Webb (2012) report on the use of graphic texts in business and in technical instruction, observing that comics can be found on all levels of education as well as in businesses where they “communicate, discuss, and critique issues on business ethics and social issues in management” (p. 106). They have even broached the wall of technical communication where they “can be widely produced as an alternative to the failings of ‘tech speak’” (p. 107). However, in this era of participation, learners no longer merely need to *consume* comics, they can now learn through *creating* them as well.

The next iteration of the ACRL’s *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* will almost certainly address the importance of students as content creators and metacognitive practice (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2013), and the newly developed Visual Literacy Standards for Higher Education calls for the students to be able to use and create images. At Emporia State University, librarians have experimented with comic creation in information literacy instruction and in library orientation and have found that students have had markedly positive reactions in both cases. This paper provides a short overview of that instructional experiment as an example of authentic learning in the information literacy classroom as it relates to the outcomes within ACRL’s standards for visual and information literacy.

Authentic Learning

While traditional learning involves lectures and textbook instruction, authentic learning, according to Callison and Lamb (2004), “involves exploring the world around us, asking questions, identifying information resources, discovering connections, examining multiple perspectives, discussing ideas, and making informed decisions” (p. 34). Newmann and Wehlage (1993) posit that through this mode of learning: “(1) Students construct meaning and produce knowledge, (2) students use disciplined inquiry to construct meaning, and (3) students aim their work toward production of discourse, products and performances that have value or meaning beyond success in school” (p. 8).

In short, authentic learning asks students to explore “real world” contexts and create “products” they might encounter outside of school. Furthermore, this mode of learning values social interaction and collaborative learning, with “learners who work together to unravel the problem” (Rule, 2006, p. 4). Additionally, students aim their products at a larger audience than just the teacher. Rule (2006) asserts that this larger sense of audience “changes the problem from an ‘exercise’ to something more important, allowing the students to become emotional stakeholders in the problem” (p. 2). Furthermore, this mode of learning demands that learners engage in higher-order thinking, “[manipulating] information and ideas in ways that transform their meaning and implications” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993, p. 9). If we think of this in terms of applicable levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, authentic learning activities are designed to have students apply, analyze, evaluate, and create using information they encounter.

Visual Literacy

In the Information Literacy classroom, there is an ongoing emphasis on searching. Libraries, and by extension, librarians, have ample opportunities to contextualize many visual literacy standards that

align with traditional functions of the library: locating, evaluating, and selecting (Hattwig, Bussert, Medaille, & Burgess, 2013). Some of these activities may focus on image resources like ARTSTOR, or open web resources like Google Image Search. However, the act of image production remains relevant as a learning outcome, but can be difficult to incorporate into student learning due to time and equipment restraints. Approved by the ACRL Board of Directors in 2011, *The Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011) more directly addresses the impact of visual mediums in the information-seeking process with an emphasis on finding, evaluating, using, and creating images. Students are frequently asked to find, use, and create images in the classroom, but a variety of issues central to our understanding of what it means to be ‘information literate’ is often neglected in information literacy instruction.

The Visual Literacy Standards Task Force’s framework of criteria for visually literate students was useful to the librarians at Emporia State University as they formulated activities with which to incorporate technology and visual storytelling into the classroom and expand discussions in class on finding information and using it ethically. The major emphasis for visual literacy competency has been creation to allow our discussion and instruction in the classroom to become more salient by providing multiple opportunities to work with images, both in the comic reflection and the final website students create to present a classroom portfolio as part of an interpretive or productive component (Brumberger, 2011). Because images have become so central to the way we share and use information, from the visual language of the internet including memes, infographics, and Instagram, as well as the charts, graphs, and other visual indicators that have been used to represent data in the workplace and academia, incorporating the visual allows the student to, in Roswell, McLean, and Hamilton’s (2012) words, “trace threads of meaning from elements in the images that can be used in the curriculum” (p. 447). In this case, understanding where and how an image was created allows instructors to tie the visual into other aspects of scholarly communication and research, or in discussing aspects of secondary analysis after collecting or finding datasets and statistics.

Visual communication has had a dramatic impact in how we receive information. Hattwig et al. (2013) describe students as “screen-based” (p. 61), and we have come to the point where many of our students carry a screen with them at all times via their phone. Because of this, students are bombarded with image, sound, picture, and video in an effort to sway their opinion, purchase their product, or present a story. As part of the curriculum for Emporia State University’s class on information literacy, librarians were eager to look at opportunities to incorporate the Visual Literacy Standards for Higher Education within the classroom as an aspect of metaliteracy (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011). Another aspect of metaliteracy outlined is the ability to incorporate technological shifts into instruction. Participatory technologies outlined by Farkas (2012) have shifted the educational environment; while many technologies still facilitate transmission from instructor to student, constructivist pedagogy allows students to actively create something meaningful to them and engage in what Lessig (2008) describes as a “remix culture”.

In the case of the information literacy narrative assignment at Emporia State University, students use images they create and find to build a short comic book addressing their learning experiences and discover how visual storytelling is relevant across disciplines. Many students engage in constructing and sharing content meaningful to them; this can be harnessed to help meet learning outcomes aligned with the various standards. By incorporating technologies like tablet computing and image creation into what would otherwise be a short written reflective piece; it allows students new

opportunities to participate with technologies to create authentic reflection pieces that tie into greater technological and creative skills useful across the curriculum.

Student-Created Comics as Information Literacy Narratives

Using the tenets of authentic learning, librarians at Emporia State University tailored an assignment to be utilized in a for-credit information literacy course (UL100) that would allow students to create content that reflected metacognitive practice. As noted above and elsewhere (see Upson & Hall, 2013) comics present a largely untapped educational opportunity for higher education, both as an instructional resource and as a potential medium for student creativity. It was determined that the iOS app *Comic Life* (Plasq, 2014) could be utilized as a creative tool for students to build “photo comics” depicting their understanding and utilization of, as well as their difficulties with, the various aspects of the research process. Students were asked to reflect on topic development, search statements, source evaluation, information ethics, and the annotated bibliography process. Using the app on library-provided iPads, students were able to structure their pages, add textual and image content, and tell their own story about how they understand information literacy concepts.

This approach also incorporated and potentially enhanced the concept of information literacy narratives. Detmering and Johnson (2012) note that written information literacy narratives can provide an opportunity for students to be heard and can allow them to demonstrate critical thinking skills, especially through the use of metaphorical language and conflict negotiation. Student-created comics add an extra dimension to the information literacy narrative. Metaphors become more complex through the combined use of text and images. Processes are easily demonstrated through sequential imagery. Conflict can be more emphatically articulated through images and text-based sound-effects. Students may also be more willing to be frank in expressing their difficulties with a concept or even with the course or instructor. In short, comics offer students the opportunity to express themselves in a more honest, insightful, and creative manner than through a traditional text reflection.



Figure 2. This panel image from a student photo comic demonstrates the willingness to poke fun at instructors and express frank honesty about course requirements.

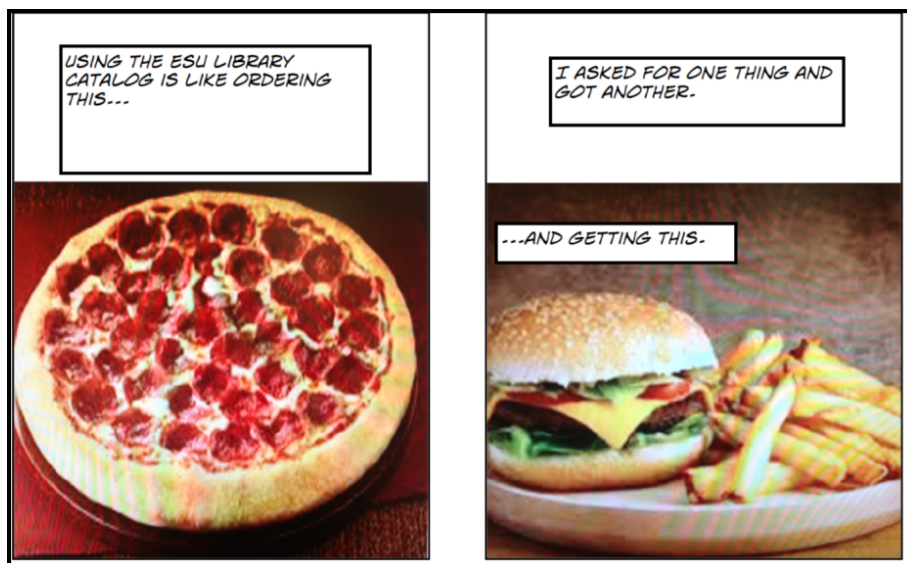


Figure 3. This panel image from a student photo comic compares the use of the library catalog to ordering a pizza and getting a hamburger and fries.

Photo Comics as Class-Created Library Guides

The *Comic Life* app was also utilized in an additional one-shot assignment for First-Year Seminar students at Emporia State University. Knowing that a significant portion of these students would have already participated in the “Amazing Library Race” scavenger hunt activity associated with ESU’s English Composition courses, the authors adapted the approach in order to prevent stagnancy and disinterest as well as reinforce previous content for those who had already completed the race. Again, focusing on the importance of content creation and reflective practice, the authors created a group-based assignment that required students to create a self-produced visual guide to the library. It would have been ideal for each group to develop their own full guide to the library; however, due to time constraints (50 minute one-shots), the classes were broken into five groups, with each group focusing on a different service or location in the library. The groups were given handouts that provided a photo of their designated area, a brief description of services provided in that area, and prompts asking for detailed information regarding services, as well as a more open-ended questions asking students to anticipate how a certain space or service would be useful to them during their time at Emporia State University. After the class, librarians saved all the pages as PDFs and combined them into a single five page comic built by and for the particular course section.

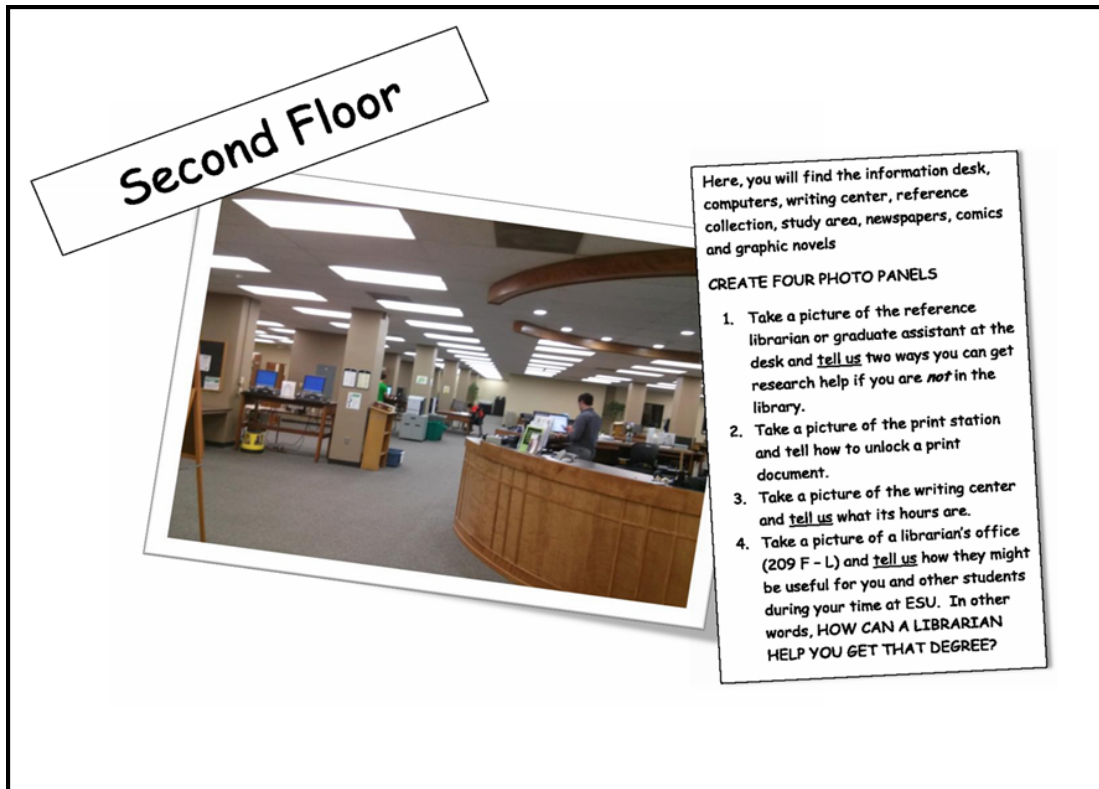


Figure 4. One of the handouts provided to First Year Seminar students. Prompts appear on the right.

Of course, the librarians were interested in students' reactions to the assignment and asked them to answer a brief questionnaire about the activity. Responses were strongly positive, with 64 of the 71 respondents (90%) giving the activity a rating of 7 or better on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 representing the highest level of satisfaction (see Figure 5).

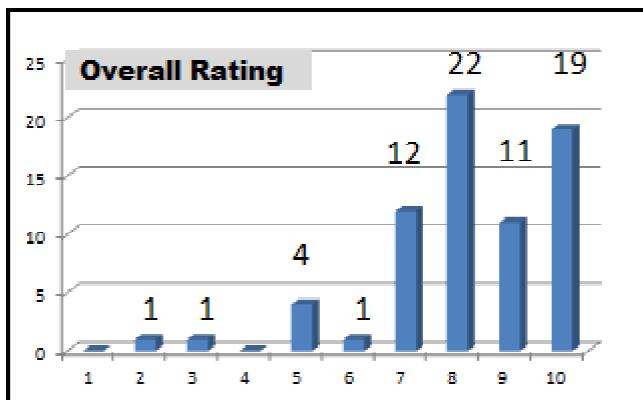


Figure 5. Overall rating of student satisfaction with the First year Seminar activity.

We also asked students to compare the comic activity to the "Amazing Library Race". As expected, a significant number of the students had completed both the race and the comic activity and could compare the two. Responses indicate that students seemed to overwhelmingly prefer the comic activity to the race (see Figure 6).

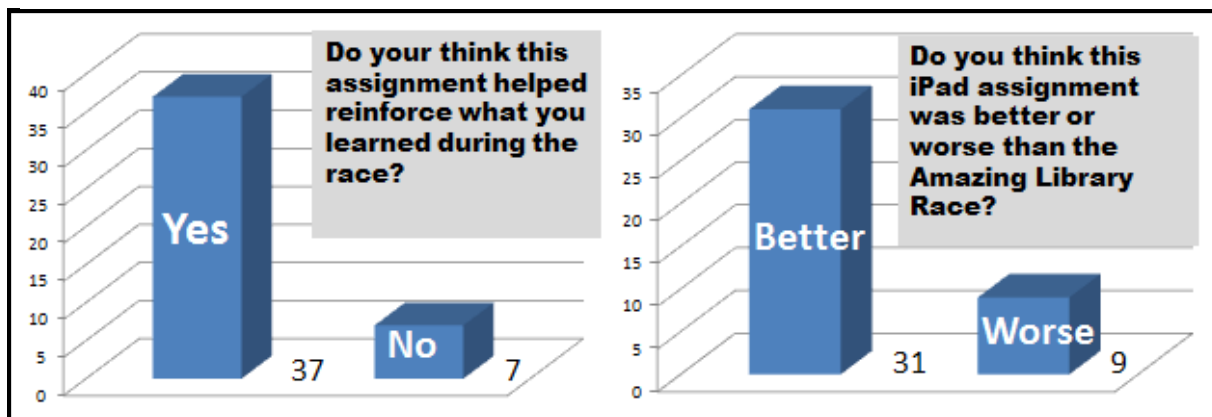


Figure 6. Students who had previously experienced the “Amazing Library Race” largely expressed greater satisfaction with the photo comic assignment and felt that it reinforced concepts learned in the initial activity.

Lastly, students were asked to comment on the activity and suggest improvements. Many asked for more time, clearer instructions on the software, more flexibility on page design/layout, and for maps of the library. These responses will be integrated into the next iteration of this activity and the librarians have been asked to lead the sessions again in following semesters.

Conclusion

The increasingly loud call for visual literacy and metaliteracy skills, as well as digital content creation, has reverberated through many academic libraries. Librarians at Emporia State University hope to continue to build on the activities described above and contribute to the overall discussion on how to actively engage students in the process of individual and group-oriented creative endeavors in the academic library. The use of photo comics in the information literacy setting appears to be a valid and engaging opportunity for students to demonstrate authentic learning and express themselves in an honest and open manner in both one-shot and extended instructional sessions.

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