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Jennifer Poggiali

Katy Kavanagh Webb

Matt Upson

Kim Allman

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ZOMBIES, PIRATES, AND LAW STUDENTS: CREATING COMICS FOR YOUR ACADEMIC LIBRARY

JENNIFER POGGIALI, KATY KAVANAGH WEBB, MATT UPSON, AND KIM ALLMAN

INTRODUCTION

Comics are continuing to gain acceptance as objects of study and analysis, as well a potential medium for delivering instruction in higher education. As the perceived educational utility of the medium grows, so too does the supporting evidence for including comics in instruction. While more study is required, comics used in the higher education environment have been shown to potentially improve the attitudes of non-majors toward science courses (Hosler & Boomer, 2011), possibly increase engagement and motivation (Short, Randolph-Seng, & McKenny, 2013), and are likely to play an increasing role as digital textbooks (Kane, 2013). The utilization and even creation of comics by educators and students also offer multiple opportunities to tie directly into the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011) as well as the upcoming revised ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Gibson & Jacobson, 2014). Multiple librarians have taken advantage of this engaging medium and have integrated comics into their own instruction. This article is a brief attempt to recount the experiences of four librarians who have attempted to utilize comics as a means to engage students and offer effective instruction.

THE ART OF COLLABORATION: MAKING COMICS AS A TEAM

When Jennifer Poggiali started as Instructional Technologies Librarian at Lehman College, City University of New York (CUNY), the library's web comic project was already underway. The first issue, *When Life Gives You Lehman...,* was developed through a partnership between the Leonard Lief Library and the college's Art Department. This partnership built on the strengths of faculty and students: library faculty designed the comic's learning objectives and wrote a script, a student intern created storyboards and drew the comic, and art faculty advised the student and guided the creation of the artwork.

Poggiali saw the strengths of this collaboration, recognized the potential of web comics to engage students, and believed that stories could be used to impart information literacy concepts and skills. As she read more about comics, particularly Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994), she came to see how the techniques of visual storytelling offered unique and fascinating opportunities for instruction. "Reading" the pictures and text of comic may require a higher level of engagement than reading only text, and it may also activate a different kind of abstract and imaginative thinking. Poggiali thought perhaps this could be harnessed for instructional purposes.

Poggiali and her collaborators in the Art Department, Michael Ferraro and Robert Wurzburg, as well as student interns Melissa Puma and Gerard Gayle, developed a new paradigm for the comics. In *The Researchers*, a cast of recurring characters, designed to look and sound like Lehman students, would go on research-related adventures in various disciplines. Specific skills and techniques would be highlighted--such as what database to use for medical research, or how to narrow a paper topic by using a set of questions--but each issue would also be structured around one or two conceptual learning objectives. The first issue attempts to convey the notions that good research requires critical thinking, and that research is a journey of discovery with no pre-determined end-point. The second issue demonstrates how research can be useful in creative disciplines, and that a research topic exists in a broad context that novice researchers can and should explore. Each issue is accompanied by an online writing

assignment meant to elicit reflective thinking on these abstract concepts, and to reinforce the concrete skills highlighted in the comics.


Figure 1: When Life Gives You Lehman...

In the year following the first comic's release, Jennifer Poggiali and library colleague Robert Farrell undertook an in-house assessment of these writing assignments. Students in six classes were asked to complete the writing assignment, and Farrell and Poggiali reviewed responses to one of the questions to assess the depth of reflection and learning demonstrated. They did not seek IRB approval for the study, so research data cannot be shared with the public. However, they saw evidence of engagement with the comic and a degree of deep reflection that they found satisfactory. Informally, Poggiali and some of her colleagues in the library have had success using the comics during in-person library sessions and as homework assignments given by discipline faculty. There is more to learn about how and in what ways these comics succeed as instructional tools—but meanwhile, *The Researchers* continues with new issues, new discoveries, and companion animated videos!

## AAARGH, MATEYS! TOONDOO AT ECU

In summer of 2011, the newly hired Instructional Design Librarian at Joyner Library was charged with the task of enlivening the LibGuides platform at East Carolina University (ECU). The first thing that was clear to Katy Kavanagh Webb was that the guides consisted of a lot of text, and that graphics of some kind would be one method of improvement. After attending a week-long workshop offered by the university during the summer entitled Teaching with Technology, she had a plan: create a cast of characters to populate a series of cartoons using the online website ToonDoo (www.toondoo.com). The website was recommended by an instructor of the workshop to create online avatars for discussion boards, but the librarian saw that the cartoons could also be used to welcome students to LibGuides, create visual interest on the page, and introduce information literacy topics.

Since the ECU mascot is a pirate, Kavanagh Webb wanted to incorporate some elements of pirate life, but did not want the action to happen on a boat. She also wanted to avoid referencing ECU's official trademarked mascot, Pee Dee the Pirate. After brainstorming and writing out characteristics of some heroes, as well as the comic relief inherent to most cartoons, the characters began to take shape. The characters she created all had famous pirate names like Blackbeard, Anne Bonny, and Henry Every, but they were modern students and librarians working on research assignments. Comic relief was brought in the form of a bumbling, clueless college student named Calico Jack. She incorporated a variety of ethnicities and ages to reflect the makeup of ECU's student body. In order to pitch the idea to her new team in Research and Instructional Services, Kavanagh Webb created READ posters and "Citation PSAs" featuring each character and presented them at a departmental meeting. Luckily, the cartoons were an immediate hit with the department. Kavanagh Webb went about the task of creating cartoon strips using these characters for the basic library skills tutorials, as well as other high traffic LibGuides. Soon the whole library began to take notice of the new characters.

Figure 2: Calico Jack for ECU
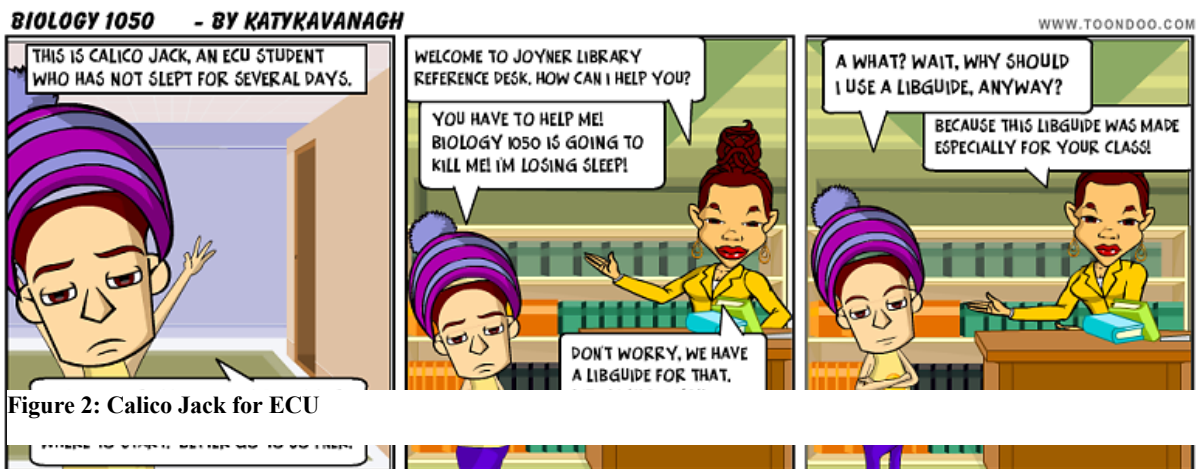
The rest of campus seemed to think they were a success, as well. The university's news bureau covered the cartoons in an article that was featured on the front page of ECU's homepage in October 2013 (Bowden). The popularity of the news story there resulted in a reprinting of the article in the local Greenville, NC newspaper. Suddenly, Henry Every and the Joyner Library cast of cartoon characters were local celebrities overnight. Always ahead of the curve, librarians had already noticed the trend when *College & Research Libraries News* picked up the story in the July/August 2013 issue (Kavanagh). Joyner Library has benefitted most from the use of the cartoons, due to the relative ease that they were incorporated into LibGuides. The cartoons can be created quickly and from any computer, meaning even during down times at the reference desk. They require little artistic skill, although planning and a vision for the cartoons are must-haves for anyone hoping to start a cartooning project at their institution.
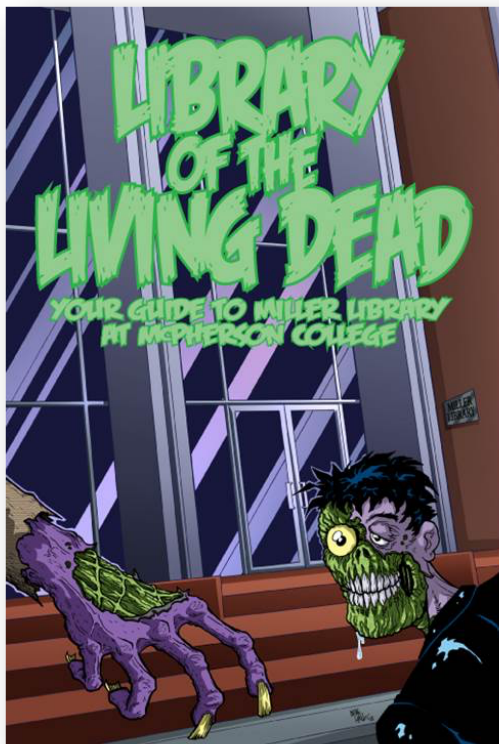
Figure 3: Library of the Living Dead

Library of the Living Dead is an instructional comic book created by Upson and Hall (2011). They produced this comic while Upson was the Director of Library Services at McPherson College and Hall was a student worker at the library during the 2010-2011 academic year. The comic was published digitally on the library website and in a small print run funded by a grant furnished by the South Central Kansas Library System. The plot of the twelve-page story focuses on two students who seek refuge in the McPherson College library during a zombie attack. Staff members then help the students fend off the zombies while navigating the library's spaces and resources. Throughout the story, sarcasm, self-deprecating humor, and spectacle are utilized to engage the student, while eight pages of focused instructional content follow the comic to reinforce concepts introduced in the story and provide a basic introduction to library skills and services.

The comic was created as a solution to an instructional problem. Upson noticed that many of his instructional approaches did not seem to have significant impact on student engagement, much less learning. As the only librarian, Upson struggled to balance instructional responsibilities with other administrative duties, and often produced simple, to-the-point handouts that covered basic library and information literacy skills but failed to engage the students in any meaningful way. Additionally, the library needed to redefine the outside perception of its spaces and services. There was a desperate need for a multi-purpose resource that could provide instruction and outreach while marketing the library.

Initially, Upson and Hall hoped to produce a video that could utilize a zombie attack premise, but realized that the costs would be prohibitive. Instead, falling back on Hall's considerable experience as an illustrator and writer, the two began to plan for the comic book version of the zombie apocalypse and created the resource over the winter of 2010 into the spring of 2011 (for more detail, see Upson & Hall, 2011).

While circumstances prevented any assessment of student learning, it became clear that the resource was engaging and encouraged conversation. Students responded well to opportunities to be involved in the creative process. Many student workers are featured in the comic and a social media following was encouraged by offering cameos in the book for Facebook likes. A teaser poster was published online and posted around campus a few months before the comic was released. The poster prompted discussion between the library and the campus, with many students, staff, and faculty expressing their interest in the project. Finally, a pizza party was held to celebrate the release of print copies of the comic. Forty to fifty students (on a campus of 600) participated in the release, asking Upson and Hall for autographs and reading and discussing the comic in the library. Additionally, students at the party were surprised to learn that over the month since the digital release of the comic, it had already been downloaded over a million times, thanks mostly to social media and sites like BoingBoing (Doctorow, 2011) and The Outreach Librarian (Zitron, 2011). There was also some discussion of utilizing the comic as a promotional tool for the college during prospective student tours. Overall, the comic project provided library staff with the opportunity to use in-house talent and strengths to produce a low-cost, multi-purpose resource that proved to be popular with both local and non-local populations. Upson and Hall have continued to create comic book guides to libraries and are currently working on an information literacy textbook for the University of Chicago Press.

TELLING A STORY WITH COMICS: THE BASICS OF SEQUENTIAL ART

In August 2007 at the newly created Charlotte School of Law Library, Kim Allman and Anthony Aycock met and the comic strip *Murphy's Law School* was born. Aycock was Head of Public Services and Allman had been hired as the Access Services Manager to help set up circulation for the new library. Aycock holds an MLIS but also has a Master's in Creative Writing, while Allman had spent most of his adult working life as a professional illustrator and caricaturist and has a Bachelor's in Fine Art and Graphic Design. Both Aycock and Allman were devoted fans of the comic medium. The two hit on the idea to create a comic strip that was a reflection of life in a law school setting while using both human and anthropomorphic animal characters.

Murphy's Law School by Aycock & Allman

Figure 4: Murphy's Law School

Being a trained illustrator, Allman brought a traditional approach to the creation of *Murphy's Law School*. He works with paper, pencil, pen, and brush, and hand-letters the dialog text in his comic illustrations. The images are then scanned and converted to digital jpeg files using GIMP, a free-share graphics program similar in scope to Adobe Photoshop. The digital files were then uploaded to the Charlotte Law Library blog, where they became a popular feature, garnering the most hits of any other content.

In 2011, Aycock left Charlotte Law to become head librarian and manager of the Justice Academy in eastern North Carolina and Allman is currently working on his MLIS through the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in addition to his duties as Access Services Manager. As a result of these changes, *Murphy's Law School* is no longer in production. Allman is working on creating another comic strip that will carry on the tradition, as well as considering on other ways his graphic and illustration talents can be put to use to enhance library information and services. He also works on a web comic of his own, called *Nigel the Nosferatu,* which interestingly enough came about due to a special project he worked on for his first class in Library and Information Studies.

For Allman, comics are a universal medium. From Snoopy to Spiderman, the sequential art form and its millions of iterations reach a vast scope of readers that more traditional forms of literature and treatises do not. Telling stories or delivering information by means of sequential images has been common since antiquity. Take a look at hieroglyphs carved into ancient Egyptian ruins and you will see that they are comics. It makes logical sense to use this medium to empower libraries to present, inform, and entertain its patrons and stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

As these four examples show, creating comics is an achievable goal in a number of different academic library contexts. Librarians can try ToonDoo or a similar software application to create comics simply and cheaply on their own. They can look outside the library's walls to collaborate with their art department or with individual art students. Of course, if they have talented colleagues or artistic gifts of their own, then all the better! Library comics can be anything from one-panel strips to full-length books, and they can be distributed in print, or digitally through a blog or a LibGuide. They can aim primarily to entertain, to instruct, to market resources and services, or to achieve a combination of all three. And libraries do not need significant budgets to create comics. The major investments are time, energy, and creativity—a small price to pay for the engagement and excitement students have manifested in all four of these comic projects.

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