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Comics to the Rescue: Finding Innovative Applications for Library Digital Learning Objects

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Article

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Abstract

When faculty were asked to use online assignments to make up the class time lost due to Hurricane Sandy, librarians at Lehman College's Leonard Lief Library spotted a new opportunity for the Library's Web comics. This article describes the partnership between the Library and the College's Art Department that led to the development of the Web comics, provides readers with a model for responding to circumstances creatively, and puts forward an approach for combining digital learning objects with writing assignments to meet faculty needs.

Innovation, far from being a semi-magical burst of genius, is often the result of the rather prosaic task of problem-solving. Librarians know this well; they are frequently called on to respond and adapt to circumstances beyond their control, such as budget cuts, technological change, and evolving user needs. This article focuses on how librarians at the Leonard Lief Library at Lehman College, City University of New York (CUNY), responded to the challenges posed by Hurricane Sandy, the November 2012 natural disaster that struck the coast of the northeastern United States. By spotting an opportunity to utilize a digital learning object in an unexpected way, librarians solved a problem for faculty who needed to make up the class time lost due to the storm, and in the process gathered useful assessment data about the learning objects.

Lehman College, a comprehensive college that includes many master's degree programs, is located in the north central part of the Bronx. The campus and the borough itself were fortunate to suffer relatively little physical damage from the storm. However, due to the suspension of city services, including bus and subway transport, and widespread power outages, classes at the twenty-four CUNY colleges were cancelled for four days.

Shortly after the storm, CUNY's Central Administration directed campuses to develop plans to compensate for those four days of instructional time. On November 6, an e-mail was sent by the Provost, Anny Morrobel-Sosa, to the Lehman College community detailing our plan. Faculty were asked to use an "interactive online learning activity and/or other out-of-class assignments (i.e., library work, literature reviews, etc.) that ensure the complete delivery of all material associated with the learning objectives for each affected course" (A. Morrobel-Sosa, personal communication, November 6, 2012). It was here that we saw an opportunity to both assist faculty and accomplish one of our semester's assessment goals.

At Lehman, the library is considered both an administrative unit and an academic department. As such we are required, under policies established by the College's Assessment Council, to assess both the effectiveness of our service areas and our impact on student learning. Each semester we must study some aspect of our instructional program, use our findings to improve the program, and write a report on this process that is submitted to the campus Assessment Office.

For the fall 2012 assessment, the Library's Instructional Unit, comprised of the Coordinator of Information Literacy and Assessment and an Instructional Technologies Librarian, planned to study the educational potential of its Web comics. Over the past several years, we worked with the College's Art Department to develop two Web-based comics (http://wp.lehman.edu/library/comics) for which we also designed short essay questions meant to prompt further reflection. We intended to ask faculty to incorporate the comics and the essay questions into their classes, but feared volunteers would be few and far between. The exigencies brought about by the hurricane created a market for the comics we could not have predicted; the time was right to start a new life for the comics as online assignments.

Comics and Learning

The educational potential of comics has been exploited by teachers and librarians in recent years. Perhaps the most common reason cited why educators should embrace comics is to reach out to the so-called "reluctant reader". As the logic goes, many students like comics more than prose works, and so collecting comics in the library or assigning them in the classroom will help engage those students. Proponents of this view tend to see comics as a stepping stone, believing that once students have learned to enjoy one medium and have gained greater confidence as readers, they will be motivated to move on to longer and more complex texts.

However, some educators have come to see comics as a medium that calls on specific intellectual and cognitive abilities. Few in this camp would fail to cite the work of comic artist and theorist Scott McCloud, particularly his *Understanding Comics* (1994). McCloud very cogently explicates and (literally) illustrates the defining attributes of comic art--such as the space between panels, where imaginative work must be done by the reader--and why he believes these attributes engage readers in a unique way. Reading comics requires analysis of words, images, and the ways the two interact to form a narrative. Comics also have their own set of conventions, which must be understood in a narrative context. Given these inherent qualities, a skillful comic in the hands of a careful reader could be expected to draw out analytic and imaginative thinking skills; but even the most lazy reader of the least worthy text must be taking these steps to some degree. Draper and Reidel (2011) conclude that the "reader of a graphic novel cannot be a passive consumer; she or he must actively participate in and with the text" (p. 5). This active engagement with a text, rather than the kind of passivity students often manifest, makes the medium particularly well-suited to advancing critical literacy--a kind of reading that demands that students evaluate and synthesize meanings while grappling with a text.

Some of these possibilities for comics have already been explored by librarians. Steven Hoover (2011) has mapped comics-based classroom activities to the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards and the ACRL/IRIG Visual Literacy Competency Standards, offering a wealth of ideas for library instruction. At least three U.S. college libraries have developed comics that promote their services and collections, and orient students to their organizational schemes. Bowling Green State University's *University Libraries Comics* (http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/comics/) include short strips, mock advertisements, and a full-length graphic novel that introduces students to the library's varied collections and services. *Library of the Living Dead*, a short graphic novel developed by librarians at McPherson College in Kansas (Upson & Hall, 2011), employs humor to promote the library and instruct readers in the basics of the Dewey Decimal System, all while tweaking the conventions of the horror genre. And, in a project directly inspired by *Living Dead*, librarians at Kansas State University Salina and Kansas Wesleyan University created *Legends of the Library Ninjas* (Schwartz, 2012) to market their collections and resources.

Development of Lehman Comics

Our Web comic project was conceived by an Instructional Technologies Librarian as a series of short, simple comic strips that would attract students to the library by portraying it as a helpful resource and a friendly place. It was thought that such comics, which would be along the lines of strips like *PhD Comics* (Cham, 2013), could be created in-house relatively quickly and with a minimum of effort. However, Lehman College is home to an innovative Art Department that includes programs in computer graphics and imaging (CGI). Drawing on a previously developed theory of entrepreneurial collaboration (Farrell, 2011), librarian Robert Farrell realized that involving students and professors from the CGI program would allow the Library to build a new relationship and access advanced technologies and skilled students. A more sophisticated and ambitious comic could result from such a relationship, and the project itself might lead to other innovations in the future.

Over the course of several months, the library's instructional unit met with members of the Art Department to discuss collaborating on this project. Through these meetings, the project expanded from comprising a number of short three- or four-panel comic strips to an on-going series of Web comics with recurring characters and complex plots. We decided to establish a yearly internship in which student artists would earn course credit (along with a small stipend from the library) to develop comic art. The Library's Instructional Technologist would provide learning objectives, content, and storylines, while faculty from both departments would meet with the student artists on a regular basis to supervise their progress. Between meetings, information would be shared via e-mail, social media, and cloud storage. This basic structure has been successfully followed for all three of our Web comics.

Partnering with the Art Department opened the door for librarians to embrace more ambitious learning objectives for the comics. Skilled student artists, with guidance from professors with expertise in animation and comic art, are well positioned to capitalize on the medium's capacity to engage readers in critical thinking and learning. In this new collaboration, Lehman librarians saw the potential for the comics to advance their information literacy goals. As the educational content and visual layout of the comics illustrate, this partnership has evolved to allow participants--students, disciplinary faculty, and librarians--to take the comics in new creative directions with each of its iterations.

The first comic is about a freshman at Lehman who, lacking self-discipline and good study habits, carelessly makes the decision to plagiarize a term paper (see Figure 1). The second comic centers on a young woman whose need for consumer health information leads her to her college library (see Figure 2). Her reference encounter with a librarian is depicted as a research "journey" and attempts to immerse the reader in the various twists and turns--from databases to Web searches and from topic to subtopic-- which such research can take. Our latest comic, which will be published online in winter 2014 and therefore not offered as a post-Sandy make-up assignment, situates its information literacy learning objectives in the context of the discipline of art history. Each

comic strives to achieve its learning objectives in part through character and narrative, which both entertain readers and assist them in making connections between the comics' instructional content and their own lives and experiences.
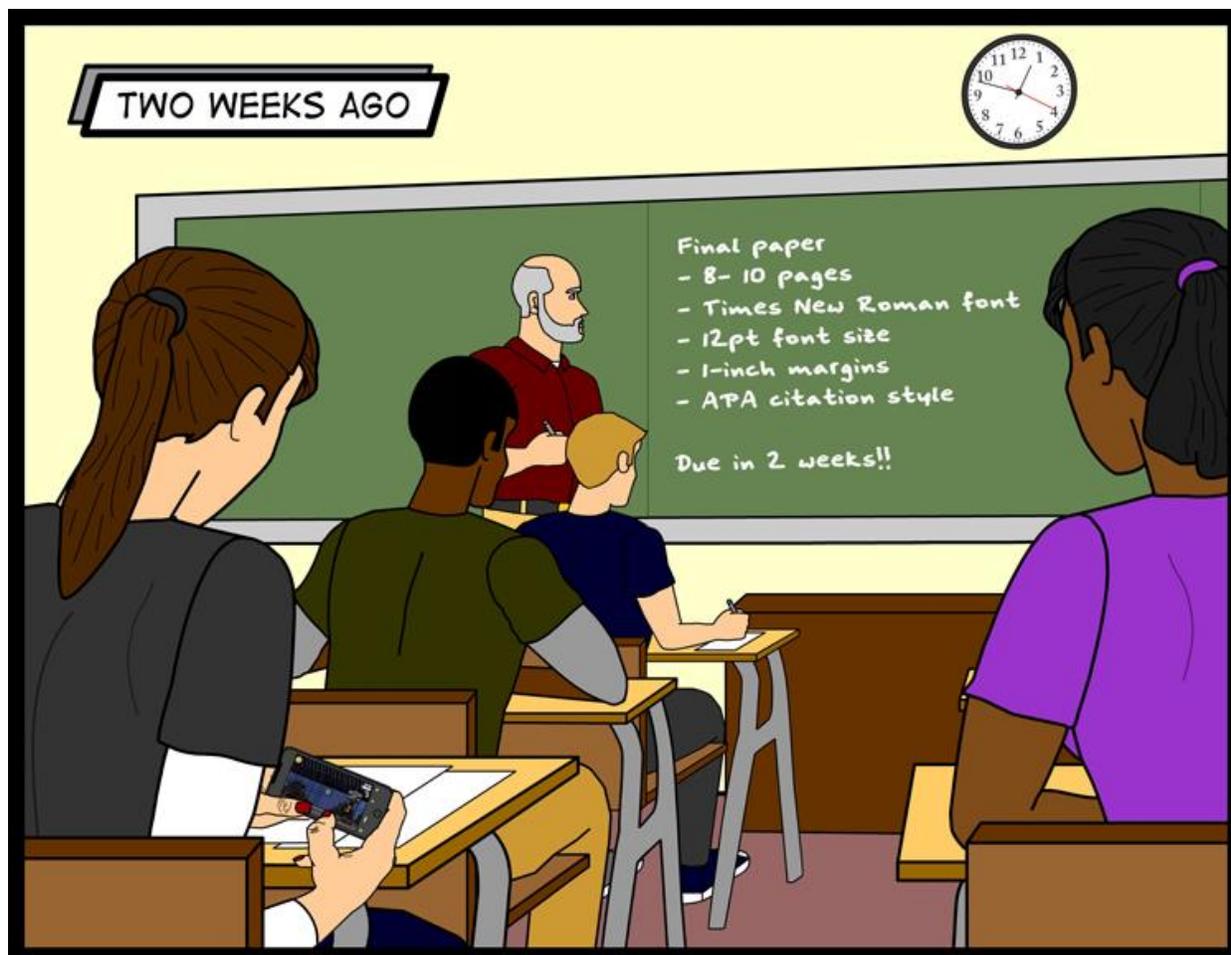

Figure 1. Marisol plays *Angry Birds* while her professor assigns a paper, in *When Life Gives You Lehman...* (2011)

Figure 2. Liz and Francisco consult with a librarian, in *The Researchers Begins!* (2012)

Each comic is accompanied by short essay questions that were designed to work on several levels (see Figures 3 and 4). The questions included in the assignments fall into three broad categories: comprehension questions, evaluation questions, and self-reflection questions. Comprehension questions guide students to engage with and reflect on the details of the comics. Such questions prevent students from simply skimming or skipping over aspects of the panels. They also help students establish the facts they will reflect on in later questions. Evaluation questions put students in the position of reflecting on the actions and behaviors of the characters. These "why" questions ask students to project themselves into the scenario of the comics, identify the reasons or motives underlying the characters' choices, and think through the consequences of particular courses of action. We hope these exercises will put students in a better position to reflect on and be more deliberate in their own choices in similar situations. Self-reflection questions ask students to take stock of their own behaviors and habits as researchers and learners. To answer these questions, students must consider whether their own actions and habits will help them achieve their goals, and how they might need to change or grow in order to succeed.

Figure 3. Assignment for *When Life Gives You Lehman…* (2011)

Figure 4. Assignment for *The Researchers Begins!* (2012)

Comics to the Rescue

Because the library conceived of this project with information literacy learning objectives in mind and with an eye towards developing a new working relationship with the Art Department, we weren't quite sure if faculty would use the comics. Imagining they could be assigned as homework, we developed short essay questions for each comic, and created simple Google Forms to enable students to submit responses electronically. After Hurricane Sandy, when faculty were suddenly in need of online learning tools, we knew that we had found an essential function for the comics.

The addition of a multiple choice question asking students their instructor's name was all that was needed to make our Google Forms ready for use by several different classes. We sent an e-mail to faculty inviting them to review the comics and their assignments and contact us if they were interested in utilizing them. We estimated that it would take students approximately 45 minutes to read and complete each of the two assignments, which would be the equivalent of a little more than a full class period-- exactly what most professors needed. Three professors (two from the freshman composition program and one from the Department of Business and Economics), together teaching a total of six course sections, responded to our e-mail.

We sent links to the comics and assignments to participating faculty along with instructions they could forward to their students. We included the contact information of Instructional Technologies Librarian Jennifer Poggiali so that students' technical problems could be handled efficiently. Each faculty member told us the date by which they expected their students to complete the assignments, and we agreed to provide the completed assignments on the next business day. Students' answers were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel, sorted and divided into separate files for each professor, and e-mailed to the appropriate faculty member. The professors then evaluated the written assignments. In total, 120 students across the six sections of courses completed the exercises related to the comics.

Outcomes and Conclusions

Since the comics are about the problems and experiences of novice researchers, it makes sense that the instructors who utilized them were teaching 100- and 200-level courses. Moreover, none of these three faculty members were using Blackboard in their classes. It is not surprising that these professors, pressed for time and unused to delivering online course content themselves, seized the opportunity to use our ready-made assignments. Going forward, we will most likely market the comics to faculty teaching courses at freshman and sophomore levels. To expand their appeal, we will also look into ways to incorporate the comics and assignments into Blackboard. Incorporating the comic assignments into Blackboard may also ease the burden of managing and delivering student responses. While working with multiple spreadsheets was not technically difficult, we foresee the possibility for errors to occur due to the amount of copying and pasting that must be done. Further, if more professors adopt the comics, using a single Google spreadsheet will become more and more cumbersome.

Although we would like to continue to have access to the student responses, it would be desirable to remove ourselves from the process by which faculty receive responses. We will look into other, more efficient mechanisms by which the assignments can be collected and delivered.

We were happy to discover, on reviewing the students' assignments, that most seemed to enjoy the comics and to learn from them. The majority of our questions functioned as expected, and we were pleased to see many responses that demonstrated that students had taken the time to reflect on their own study habits and behaviors. However, we need to think about ways to engage students who have or think they have a grasp of the comics' instructional content. For example, questions such as, "Has this Web comic changed the way you think about research? If so, how? If not, why not?", the last question posed to students about *The Researchers Begins!*, prompted significant reflection from students answering in the affirmative, but little reflection from the students who answered in the negative. We will need to reword this question or add an additional question to prompt students to make connections between past information literacy instruction and the content of the comic.

The most significant conclusion we arrived at through our work responding to needs of faculty following Hurricane Sandy was that faculty appreciate ready-made and effective online assignments that will help them make up for lost class time. In the latter part of each semester, we plan to promote the comics as a way faculty can compensate for classes they've cancelled for any of the number of reasons that might crop up in a normal semester (illness, snow closures, conferences, etc.). Like all library instruction programs, we receive requests from faculty looking for a way to keep their students busy when instructors are unable to make it to their classes. Although we require faculty to be present during all information literacy instruction sessions, and so are typically unable to accommodate last minute "substitute" requests, we recognize the need for activities and assignments that will alleviate these difficulties. We have begun to offer faculty the option of having their students report to the library's classroom to read and complete the comic assignments and, when feasible, take the library's self-guided mobile tour. In the first month of the semester following Sandy we found three opportunities to use the comics and tour in this way, which has allowed us to accommodate faculty needs without accepting the role of ad hoc substitute teacher. As we go forward, we expect our experience of bringing comics to the rescue will continue to prompt us to find new, unforeseen uses for these digital learning objects.

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