

# TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE LIBRARY: STUDENT-GENERATED COMICS AS INFORMATION LITERACY NARRATIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

Narrative reflection is often a component of information literacy instruction. Reflection provides the opportunity for students to question the research process, their own actions within that process, and the effectiveness of the instructor. By embedding that reflection within a narrative, or story, students are able to express themselves in a more informal and honest manner, opening the door for more effective and “deep” learning.

Narrative reflection provides a vehicle to monitor metacognitive practices and illustrate the strategies students use to complete the ongoing research task initiated by the student at the beginning of the semester. As an ongoing assessment of student learning, the assignments attempt to monitor how students learn. Theide (2003) notes that “metacognitive monitoring is necessary for effective regulation of study” (p. 1470) and coupled with the research question, helps to optimize student learning.

The use of graphic novels, comics, or comics-based instruction in higher education environments has increased in recent years (Upson & Hall, 2013), presenting the added opportunity to increase student engagement through the use of multimodal narrative. As part of a general education information literacy course, we have implemented an assignment that combines the concepts of narrative reflection and graphic narrative within the context of a for-credit information literacy course that focuses on the research process.

## THE RATIONALE

Information Literacy and Technology (UL100) is a 2-credit-hour course offered by library faculty at Emporia State University and fulfills a general education requirement for

information technology. The course focuses on the various components of the research process with modules on topic development, searching, source evaluation, citation and ethical use of information, as well as an annotated bibliography assignment. The course culminates in the presentation of an online portfolio that demonstrates mastery of the research process as well as a self-reflection on the student’s research experience.

We have expanded upon the reflective portion of the final portfolio project by creating an assignment that requires each student to create a photo comic that addresses their experiences with and understanding of the research process during the course. The assignment integrates two instructional trends: narrative reflection and the use of comics in the classroom.

Information literacy narratives have received a good deal of attention in recent years and offer a real opportunity for students to share their experience:

In narratives, students shape the complex and sometimes chaotic realities of academic research into coherent stories, textual records that invite critical analysis and reflection. Suffused with descriptive details and rich in meaning, these stories provide vivid insight into how students conceptualize the research process and how they perceive their often tenuous roles as researchers in specific academic contexts. In their stories, students often describe the challenges they face during research, as well as their emotional responses to the research experience, including . . . feelings of anxiety and confusion. (Detmering & Johnson, 2012, p. 6)

Furthermore, according to McGuinness and Brien (2007), reflective work can improve learning by “creating and

sustaining favourable conditions which stimulate learning”, “encouraging deep, rather than surface learning”, “improving the student’s metacognitive capabilities”, allowing students “to organize thoughts in a relatively informal and expressive manner” (p. 28). Reflective assignments and commentary may also result in more “authentic assessment” of information literacy and critical thinking skills and can be mapped directly to information literacy models as a means to assess student development and needs (McKinney & Sen, 2012). When considering the assessment of reflective assignments, it should be noted that

Reflective learning is not what happens to a student, it is what the student does with what has happened. When we assess reflection it is important that we do not assess the content of an experience but rather that we assess what the student has done with the content. (Bourner, 2003, p. 267)

As a complementary approach to the reflective assignment, we chose to require that the reflection be delivered in the form of a photo comic, which is simply a sequential narrative told through the use of photos, rather than hand drawn art. Before we move on to a discussion of how the photo comics were created, a brief primer on the use of comics, photo or otherwise, in the academic classroom would be useful. Comics have been used to as a way to encourage literacy, engage and motivate students (especially non-majors and weak students), prompt participation, and may be viewed by students as subversive of traditional educational approaches (for a more detailed examination, see Upson & Hall, 2013). An upcoming empirical study claims that comics or “graphic novels may improve memory and be more effective in teaching students than a traditional textbook” (Price, 2013, paragraph 1). Comics are continuing to gain credibility and utility in academia.

More importantly, for our purposes, comics provide the ideal vehicle for student-produced reflective narratives. “Narratives told in comics have abundant potential to be expressive of the artist’s particular point of view” (Pratt, 2009, p. 115) and the multimodal nature of comics allows for the complementary interaction of text and images, that may be obviously connected or have a more abstract relationship. In short, comics provide the opportunity for a more expressive reflective exercise. Moreover, the utility of photo comics, as opposed to hand-drawn comics, may offer a degree of flexibility and greater sense of confidence to students who feel that they have little artistic talent.

Working with the comic in the classroom instead of the standard reflective essay was aided by a large push at Emporia State University to flip the classroom and increase the amount of lecture delivered online via the learning management system, allowing facilitation of more in-class activities to aid in student learning. Student learning in the flipped classroom of UL100 allowed us to integrate participatory technologies and move toward a pure constructivist approach to learning, as the classroom became a place for students to learn by doing, and, in this case, assess what they had done through a reflection activity that was completed in-class. This model, according to

Bobish (2010) can “contribute and alter information to the point that participation is almost necessary...for students to understand what is in front of them” (p. 55).

The assignment itself presents an opportunity for improved learning from multimedia sources, and, in this instance, the use of new technologies in the classroom. Farkas (2011) outlined the need for a ‘2.0 Pedagogy’, noting that “participatory technologies are not transformative in and of themselves” and that classes that focus on content created by the instructor using new technologies are not as effective as students using the same tools” (p. 85) While Farkas goes on to illustrate the use of blogs and wikis, we opted for the comic in an effort to integrate student-centered narrative in the classroom, introduce students to mobile technology, and incorporate the concept of new literacies and critical reflexivity outlined by Buschman (2009) in his exploration of Information Literacy concepts and arguments (p. 106).

Wiley and Hemmerich (2003) note that “the presentation of loosely connected texts and images in hypermedia environments allow learners to navigate information with more flexibility” (p. 1493) and allows multiple representations of the ideas presented during the course, allowing for greater recall of information. This assignment centers on the outcomes for standard six of ACRL’s Visual Literacy Standards for Higher Education (2011), asking students to design and “create meaningful images and visual media to represent and communicate concepts, narratives, and arguments” (Standard 6 Indicator 1).

## THE ASSIGNMENT

The photo comic reflection assignment consists of two components: the writing of a script and the actual creation of the comic. The scripting process involved the planning and design of a five page comic intended to focus on the five major topics (and their associated assignments) featured in the course: topic development, searching, source evaluation, citation and ethical aspects of information, and the creation of an annotated bibliography. Students were asked to create detailed panel descriptions for each page, using them to determine the textual and visual narrative content for each reflective topic. These scripts are essentially written as simple screenplays, with an emphasis on telling a story both in words and images. The script also allows students to organize their narrative before they commit to the creation of the comic.

## Figure 1: Script Sample

PAGE ONE – A focus on topic development and overall reflection.

Panel One: *This panel shows a picture of Matt Upson talking at the front of the room about the research project. “blah ,blah, blah...Research...blah, blah, blah” Dana is also in the picture but to the side, sitting at computer listening to Matt.*

Tina: Oh no, not ANOTHER research project...

Panel Two: *A picture of me looking at a diesel book, but looking skeptical and confused.*

Tina(voiceover): I had chosen the topic of diesel technology, but as I began my research I started to realize how difficult that topic was actually going to be. Not only would it be difficult because I couldn't find much information about it, but also because I don't really know a lot about it.

Panel Three: *Me reading a book on elder abuse and neglect and looking much more confident.*

Tina: I feel much better about my new topic. Elder abuse and neglect is something I am much more interested in. Not to mention, I can find a lot more helpful information on the topic, and I have previous knowledge of the subject.

Panel Four: *Me sitting at computer with keyword bubbles above my head (caregivers, older people, and intentional harm)*

Tina (voiceover): Now that I have a broad idea of my topic, I need to try to narrow and specify my research by using some keywords and creating a research question. I think I can use the question “What are causes and symptoms of elder abuse and neglect by caregivers?”

Once approved by the instructor, the script can then be used to create the digital photo comic. We opted to utilize an app for iPad called “Comic Life”, available through iTunes. This app is currently priced at \$4.99 and can be shared across five iPads, although app store terms and conditions require a separate license for each iPad if they are to be used by multiple students. Comic Life is also available as a desktop application (<http://plasq.com/>) that has expanded capabilities, but we have limited this assignment to the iPad app to create a more streamlined creative experience that allows students to take photos, create the comic, and share the product with a single device.

The app, while straightforward, does require a bit of practice for students to understand how to access certain functions. There is an embedded basic instructional guide available within the app and it may be useful to have students scan the contents before attempting to create their comics. It is easy for students to start a new comic with an existing theme or blank template. Within that template, students may further select template options that allow for a variety of panel numbers and layouts. Within each blank panel is a camera icon that can be used to either add existing photos from an album or allow a photo to be taken and added immediately as that panel illustration. Some manipulation of the photo size is usually

necessary, as the panel acts as a “window” through which the photo is seen. While the panel size and shape can be adjusted, it is important for students to consider how they would like their images to appear within the panel and the page as a whole. After photos have been added, stylized lettering can be added and adjusted, as well as text panels or bubbles. While not necessary, a Bluetooth keyboard was useful to allow students to type the dialogue and narration. More pages can be added and the process is repeated. When the assignment was completed, the comics were shared as PDF files with the students so they could distribute and reproduce the comic as needed. This allowed our students to share experiences and impressions of the course and course concepts and integrate a creative component into the electronic portfolio created during the course.

## ASSESSMENT

The assignment was graded in two segments: the script and the finished comic. For the script assignment, the instructional prompt, provided via online course document, was as follows:

A 1-2 page summary of your comic, including an overview of topic development, search statement, evaluation of sources, the ethical aspects of information, and feelings towards your annotated bibliography. The script should also include an overview of how the comic is structured as a narrative: how will the information be presented visually?

Our simple rubric for the script can be viewed in Table 1.

The final comic component of the assignment was prompted in the following manner:

- Topic Development Reflection: Why did you choose the topic you chose? Did you have difficulty choosing a topic? Why or why not? How did you refine your topic to make it more appropriate for focused research? How can you improve your topic development skills?
- Searching Reflection: What were your thoughts on searching a database and catalog? Have you used electronic databases in the past? How did it compare to resources you're familiar with? Did you have any problems searching or finding results? How did you fix these problems?
- Evaluation of Sources Reflection: How did you evaluate the information you found? What were some of the differences you found between web resources, things found in electronic databases, and things found in books? What impact did the information timeline play in your source selection?
- Ethics Reflection: Do you understand how to ethically use information? What impact does copyright have on

your topic? How do you cite your sources? Do you feel it's important to cite things?

- Annotated Bibliography Reflection: How did you put everything together in the end? What impact would this have if you had to write a paper on the topic, or make a movie (or a comic?) Do you find annotations useful? Why or why not?
- Overall Reflection: Did this class help you better understand how to find and use relevant and appropriate information for course research? How satisfied were you with this course and your own progress?

The rubric for the photo comic can be viewed in Table 2.

## COMICS AND THE FUTURE

As a method of student reflection, we have found the approach of comics to be useful. Because of the constructivist approach to student learning and interaction, and the efforts on campus to flip the classroom, time spent in-class working on the comic increased student engagement with the activity, though giving iPads to students created some drop in student productivity. However, the interactivity inherent in using the comic app has led to increased consideration for using the app in other library instruction activities, including student tours of the library and promotional or instructional materials created by library faculty.

As mobile devices continue to infiltrate the classroom, harnessing these technologies is important to allow students to be information literate by compiling and synthesizing sources found during bibliographic instruction to create new information resources. The ability to create transformative works, incorporate new technologies and new literacies, and allow for student narrative make comics particularly well suited for use in the information literacy classroom.

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**Table 1: Rubric for Script Assignment**

<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>
<p><b>Points Range: 0 -13</b> Does not include reflective overview of the following components: topic development search statements, evaluation of sources, the ethical aspects of information, and annotated bibliography. Narrative lacks coherence and does not use specific examples from class.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 14 - 15</b> Includes minimal reflective overview of the following components: topic development, search statements, evaluation of sources, the ethical aspects of information, and annotated bibliography. Narrative is minimally coherent and includes few specific examples from course.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 16 – 20</b> Includes reflective overview of the following components: topic development, search statements, evaluation of sources, the ethical aspects of information, and annotated bibliography. Narrative is coherent and includes specific examples from course.</p>

**Table 2: Rubric for Final Photo Comic Assignment**

	<b>Below Average</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Above Average</b>
<b>Topic Development Reflection</b>	<p><b>Points Range: 0 - 6</b> Does not use specific examples from class, does not clearly state chosen topic, does not show how topic was refined throughout semester, and does not address potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 7 - 7</b> Using minimal specific examples from class, may not clearly state chosen topic, minimal examples of how topic was refined throughout semester, and minimally addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 8 - 10</b> Using specific examples from class, clearly states chosen topic, shows how topic was refined throughout semester, and addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>
<b>Searching Reflection</b>	<p><b>Points Range: 0 - 6</b> Does not use specific examples from class, fails to describe the experience of searching databases, catalogs, and the web. Does not address difficulties and solutions to problematic searching, and potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 7 - 7</b> Using minimal specific examples from class, minimally describes the experience of searching databases, catalogs, and the web. Minimally addresses difficulties and solutions to problematic searching, and potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 8 - 10</b> Using specific examples from class, describes the experience of searching databases, catalogs, and the web. Addresses difficulties and solutions to problematic searching, and potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>
<b>Evaluation of Sources Reflection</b>	<p><b>Points Range: 0 - 6</b> Does not use specific examples from class, fails to compare and contrast the differences in results derived from database, catalog, and web searches. Does not address potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 7 - 7</b> Using minimal specific examples from class, does not sufficiently compare and contrast the differences in results derived from database, catalog, and web searches. Minimally addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 8 - 10</b> Using specific examples from class, compares and contrasts the differences in results derived from database, catalog, and web searches. Addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.</p>
<b>Ethics Reflection</b>	<p><b>Points Range: 0 - 6</b> Does not use specific examples from class, fails to discuss an area of information ethics:</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 7 - 7</b> Using minimal specific examples from class, offers minimal discussion of an area of information ethics:</p>	<p><b>Points Range: 8 - 10</b> Using specific examples from class, discuss an area of information ethics: citations, scholarly</p>

	citations, scholarly communications, fair use, open access, etc. Does not address potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.	citations, scholarly communications, fair use, open access, etc. Minimally addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.	communications, fair use, open access, etc. Addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.
<b>Annotated Bibliography Reflection</b>	<b>Points Range: 0 - 6</b> Does not use specific examples from class, fails to describe the purpose of the annotated bibliography, fails to discuss the potential usefulness of the resource in the research and writing process. Does not address potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.	<b>Points Range: 7 - 7</b> Uses minimal specific examples from class, offer minimal description of the purpose of the annotated bibliography and minimal discussion of the potential usefulness of the resource in the research and writing process. Minimally addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.	<b>Points Range: 8 - 10</b> Using specific examples from class, describe the purpose of the annotated bibliography and discuss the potential usefulness of the resource in the research and writing process. Addresses potential for continued success in this facet of the research process.
<b>Overall Reflection</b>	<b>Points Range: 0 - 20</b> Overall structure of comic is incoherent. Text and image choices have no contextual connection and clarity. Has major grammatical errors that interfere with overall narrative. Does not meet required minimum page count or minimum panels per page.	<b>Points Range: 21 - 23</b> Overall structure of comic is lacking in coherence. Text and image choices lack solid contextual connection and clarity. Has few major grammatical errors that interfere with overall narrative. Meets required minimum page count and minimum panels per page.	<b>Points Range: 24 - 30</b> Overall structure of comic is coherent. Text and image choices have contextual connection and clarity. Is free of major grammatical errors that interfere with overall narrative. Meets required minimum page count and minimum panels per page.