

TechMatters: Get Animated: Online Tools for Creating Comics in the Classroom

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Interested in identifying new ways to engage students with library instruction? Looking to provide students with an alternative means to demonstrate their understanding of class content? Want to explore additional ways to infuse active learning into your classes? If so, then consider adding comic creation tools into your information literacy instructional toolkit.

Comics & Cartoons & Library Instruction, Oh My!

To some, comics may not seem like a natural fit with library instruction. However, injecting a little fun and levity, along with some interesting and informative visuals, into our teaching can go a long way towards getting students motivated and interested in the information we want to share with them.

For example, as instructors, you might want to use these tools to personally create comic strips that can be embedded into your teaching materials to introduce new concepts or spark classroom discussion. Once created, they can be included on handouts, sprinkled throughout PowerPoint slides, and added into online course systems or web pages.

Of course, these tools can also be used by students in the classroom and for course assignments. For example, rather than an oral report, allow students engaged with group work to “present” their ideas back to the class in the form of a comic. In the case of a for-credit library course, you could have students create a comic to communicate their expectations or anxieties about the class as an introductory assignment or to summarize their learning experience at the end.

The Tools

When it comes to online comics creation tools, the options are plentiful and diverse. Here are some of the most interesting, including a broad overview of their features.

ArtisanCam Super Action Comic Maker

<http://www.artisancam.org.uk/flashapps/superactioncomicmaker/>

Simple, straightforward, and classic: these are the words that come to mind when working with Super Action Comic Maker. As the name of this application suggests, comics

created with it are limited to the super hero genre. The tool allows users to create a basic six panel comic strip (see Figure 1), with the frame sizes preset by the system. On a frame by frame basis, users may select a background, choose from among six characters, and add word/thought bubbles, captions, and superhero actions (such as punching or jumping) and “sound effects” (think 1960s Batman TV show-BLAM! ZAP!) to relay their “story.”

Figure 1: A comic created using Super Action Comic Maker



With limited configuration options, students can focus more on content and not get lost in the comic creation process. Of course, the potential drawback here is a limit on the creativity students might bring to a project. Perhaps not every topic is best served by being conveyed by superhero protagonists!

Make Beliefs Comix

<http://www.makebeliefscomix.com/>

For a tool with more robust configuration options, try Make Beliefs Comix which gives users a choice between a two-, three-, or four-panel layout, access to a fairly large and diverse group of characters, as well as the option to insert additional “props” such as food items, pets, sporting equipment and technology.

Figure 2: A comic created using Make Beliefs Comix



One minor drawback of MakeBeliefsComix is that you can't save a copy directly from their site, so students need to remember to print or email a link back to their comic before leaving the site. Another option would be to use your computer's screen capture functionality to clip and save a copy of your comic to your local machine.

Storybird

<http://storybird.com/>

Rather than traditional "comics", Storybird facilitates the creation of online picture books (see Figure 3). The application provides the artwork and you (or your students) provide the narrative. To get started, users may browse the "story art" provided by the system by either artist or theme and then "Start a Storybird" based on that item. Once in the story editor, users may drag and drop artwork into the Storybird, add and delete pages, and insert a narrative onto each page. Simple as that. The artwork is quite professional-looking, reminiscent (depending on choices made by the user) of greeting cards, children's books or animated shorts; this provides a lot of ready, high-polished images & characters that students can use to tell a story.



Figure 3:
Panels from a
Storybird
"picture book"

An account is not necessary to start creating Storybirds, but users will need one if they wish to save and/or publish Storybirds. Storybird offers free teacher memberships which allow for the creation of up to 75 student accounts across three classes and creates a separate area for the development and sharing of course related Storybirds.

Bitstrips

<http://bitstrips.com>

What sets this tool apart from the others is the ability to create custom characters. In fact, the first step in using Bitstrips is to create your own avatar which can then be inserted into the comic strips that you create. The application walks you step by step through the process allowing you to customize everything from hair color and style, to height, build, and wardrobe choices. To save your avatar, and to use the program to make and save comics, you will need to create an account at the end of the configuration process.

Once in that actual "comic builder", you will discover many options to help you create a highly customized comic strip (see Figure 4). You control the layout and number of panels, can choose from a large selection of background images and characters, add props, furniture, and effects, along with customized text bubbles. Of course, you also have the option of creating and inserting your own characters (including your own avatar). Upon completion, you can save your strip and decide whether or not to "publish" it for the entire world to see.

Figure 4: A comic created using Bitstrips



The primary downside of this site is the slightly higher learning curve, which might not make it the best choice for single class exercises. Additionally, it requires a small fee (e.g., \$9.95/month per 'classroom'). But, for longer term projects where students have more time to explore and familiarize themselves with it, Bitstrips could be an ideal choice.

As mentioned earlier, the sites described above represent only a small sampling of the online comic creation tools available. Additional tools to consider include Pixton (<http://www.pixton.com>), Strip Generator (<http://stripgenerator.com>), as well as photo-based tools Befunky (<http://www.befunky.com/>) and Bubblr! (<http://www.pimpampum.net/bubblr>) both of which allow you to add word and thought bubbles to images. To find others, try a search using the keywords "create comics online" in your favorite search engine. Regardless of the tool(s) you choose to use, incorporating comics into your instructional efforts may provide a new source of inspiration for both you and your students.