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Sequential Art & Academic Library Instruction:

Crafting a Toolbox of Multiple Literacies for Credit Courses.

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Abstract

Sequential art is a unique storytelling medium that combines visuals and content in a deliberate, specific delivery in order to engage audiences on emotional and cognitive levels. Consequently, graphic novels, comics, and comix are a rich educational medium for undergraduate credit instruction in academic libraries, precisely because this alternative delivery of content can effectively educate many learning styles. This article documents the development and implementation of an undergraduate, upper-division credit-bearing course in an academic library that examined multiple types of literacy through the medium, with commentary on instructional strategies for other academic librarians and professors.

Keywords: Sequential art, academic libraries, information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, diversity, credit instruction

Introduction: Graphic Novels & Library Instruction

Sequential art is a unique storytelling medium that combines visuals and content in a deliberate, specific delivery in order to engage audiences on emotional and cognitive levels. Within the United States, this medium manifests in comics, comix, cartoons, webcomics, and graphic novels. Furthermore, many nations, regions, and cultures across the globe have different names and forms of expression for sequential art, such as the manga phenomenon in Japan, manhwa in Korea, or amar chitra katha in India. These visually-based stories are a strong educational medium for elementary,

secondary, and collegiate because they provide students a versatile platform to explore diverse narratives while developing multiple literacies.

This article details the creation and implementation of a collegiate credit-bearing course about graphic novels, comics, and comix in an academic library environment. Before moving on, it is crucially important to define some terms found throughout this article. To start with, sequential art is a unique storytelling medium that combines visuals and content in a deliberate, specific delivery in order to engage audiences on emotional and cognitive levels. Comics are one form of sequential art, and are loosely defined as shorter strips of sequential art in panel form and used in an on-going series for storytelling purposes, graphic novels are novel or novella-length narratives of sequential art that rely on similar visual and storyboarding techniques (McCloud 1994; Wolk 2008). In contrast, comix – another form of sequential art – refers to the comics-based narratives that flouted the Comics Code Authority guidelines as they emerged in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Comix usually were self-published and had limited distribution (McCloud 1994; Hadju 2008; Van Lente & Dunlavey 2012). ~~Lastly, graphic novels are novel-length texts of sequential art (McCloud 1994).~~ As a brief aside, please note that this article will not attempt to provide a condensed history of sequential art (in the United States or otherwise). Far better scholars have already done so; additionally, the aforementioned history is so robust that several texts have been dedicated to the

subject (McCloud 1994; Hadju 2008; Duncan, Smith & Levitz 2009; Van Lente & Dunlavey 2012 – and this is simply a few names of the many).

The recent ubiquity and reinvigoration of sequential art in popular culture – which includes comics, comix, cartoons, webcomics, and graphic novels – corresponds with a rise of educators mining the medium for its instructional opportunities. Examples of using sequential art in library settings, for diverse purposes, are found throughout the library and information science literature. In reviewing the LIS literature, school and media librarians some of the earliest to embrace the genre for its “cool” factor (Heaney 2007); for engaging reluctant readers (Laycock 2007; Horton 2005); for instructional opportunities about visual literacy in the K-12 environment (Mouly 2011); for engaging students with disabilities (Moeller & Irwin 2012); for promoting public health educational efforts around issues such as HIV/AIDS (Albright & Gavigan 2014); and for prompting children to explore worldviews different from their own (Downey 2009).

Evidence for the use or the presence of sequential art texts within academic library environments is somewhat limited. The majority of academic library activities related to sequential art center around collection development as means of representation and inclusion of diverse voices (Toren 2011; Masuchika & Boldt 2010; Bossman 2014); as an opportunity for public programming and outreach (Smith, Hunter & Eckwright 2009); and as a method for supporting teacher and librarian education at the graduate level (Williams & Peterson 2009). Indeed, scholars Downey and Davidson

(2012) performed a review of graphic novels in LIS graduate curriculum at ALA-accredited institutions, and discovered that graphic novels were assigned and taught during coursework – which suggested a growing acceptance of the medium as an instructional tool. Furthermore, Downey’s earlier article (2009) argues that graphic novels have a place in academic libraries curriculum collections because they support the research and training needs of future educators.

While school and media librarians have documented their use of sequential art in instructional settings, or as a means of outreach/engagement to patrons, few academic librarians have written about incorporating sequential art texts into credit-bearing collegiate instruction. It should be noted that this gap in the literature may reflect lack of opportunity rather than an overt disinterest in the medium (i.e., many academic librarians may not have the opportunity to design and teach credit courses). However, those academic librarians who have both the opportunity and the interest are often equally as enthusiastic as their K-12 counterparts. Scholars O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay (2006) advocate for the importance of including graphic novels in academic libraries to support faculty curriculum/instruction choices in their article, “Graphic Novels in Academic Libraries: From Maus to Manga and Beyond.” And Steven Hoover outlines the skills and competencies instructors can impart to their students through his 2011 article, “The Case for Graphic Novels.”

It is important to acknowledge that collegiate instructors from other disciplinary backgrounds have also adopted the genre because of its versatility as an instructional medium. In their article "The Graphic Novel: A 'Cool' Format for Communicating to Generation Y," scholars Jeremy Short and Terrie Reeves (2009) conducted an analysis of graphic novels through the lens of Marshall McLuhan's theoretical concept of "hot" vs. "cool" media. They concluded that graphic novels, as a medium, could be applied to theoretical concepts within the business discipline before calling for further research. Authors Alicia Decker and Mauricio Castro (2012) published a case study on their experiences in using graphic novels to supplement course materials in their undergraduate history course which focused upon World War II. They concluded that their use of Ponticelli and Dysart's *Unknown Soldier* was successful in promoting examination of historical themes.

Compared to the wealth of literature devoted to the collection development opportunities found in sequential art, very little scholarly LIS literature details the implementation of a credit-bearing course about sequential art – and its many forms – in collegiate library instruction, which suggests that few librarians have taught a credit course on this admittedly narrow topic. Therefore, in developing an original credit course on this topic, it was difficult to cull any 'best practices' from the existing literature for this specific focus.

Crafting LIBR 320: Multiple Literacies through Graphic Novels, Comics, and Comix

In their chapter from *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures*, "Toward a Toolbox of Comics Studies," authors Kukkonen and Haberkorn outline a strong argument that, rather than one single educational theory or paradigm, teaching a combination of *integrated* multiple literacies can better enable students to explore the genre of sequential art. Essentially, Kukkonen and Haberkorn call for a multidisciplinary approach to comics analysis, maintaining that while single disciplinary analysis techniques associated with visual syntax or linguistic analysis are useful for understanding this medium, these tools assess only one aspect of the medium rather than providing a holistic assessment of an entire narrative. The authors further maintain that using multiple theoretical tools in tandem, which they have named 'The Toolbox Approach,' to examine the medium provides the most accurate assessment of sequential art *and* yields the highest volume of potential instructional opportunities for professors who are seeking to engage students. While these authors are the first to coin the phrase 'The Toolbox Approach' in application to teaching sequential art, many other scholars have commented on the genre's versatility as a teaching tool (Lyga & Lyga 2004; Frey & Fisher 2008; Cornog & Perper 2009; Bakis & Carter 2014).

Kukkonen and Haberkorn's 'Toolbox Approach' proved to be a fundamental component of LIBR 320: Multiple Literacies through Graphic Novels, Comics, and Comix. The LIBR 320 course plan and implementation followed 'The Toolbox Approach' in spirit,

and the learning outcomes and tasks were specifically designed to prompt students to examine sequential art through the lens of different *literacies*: visual, media, information, and multicultural. Thus, all tasks and in-class activities assembled into LIBR 320 centered on developing new skills in several types of literacy by 1) Discussing the definitions, principles, and seminal theories through lecture and peer-comments on discussion boards, and 2) Practicing the concepts through examination of sequential art materials in structured assignments.

In order to create a common understanding among students, LIBR 320 began with an admittedly Euro-centric overview of sequential art in the United States over the twentieth and twenty-first century, covering the Golden, Silver, and Modern Ages of comics before discussing the rise of underground comix. Students then explored examples of graphic novels and different forms of sequential art from around the world. The remainder of the course content centered on the aforementioned literacies.

Early concepts introduced in LIBR 320 included intellectual freedom and censorship, defined and presented in combination with information literacy principles (ACRL Information Literacy 2000). The history of sequential art is fraught with attempts at censorship, and examining these concepts in tandem with case studies selected from the history of comics is a natural fit. Examining the historical context that led up to the Frederic Wertham text, *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the subsequent censorship strategies employed upon an entire industry (Hadju 2008), demonstrates the far-

reaching effects of censorship – including its eventual (and partial) contribution to the reactionary rise of underground comix (Van Lente & Dunleavy 2012). Even today, libraries receive requests to ban titles due to perceived controversial content (Comic Books Legal Defense Fund 2014). As an instructional tool, these historical events provides students all the best opportunities afforded by hindsight: A chance to examine the event, the subsequent effects, and to ask critical questions about the ethics of intellectual freedom; the perceived versus actual effects of legislative censorship; and to imagine why the ideas within *Seduction of the Innocent* were deemed so meritorious as to spawn an entire national movement that resulted in the Comics Code of Authority (McCloud 1997; Van Lente & Dunleavy 2012).

LIBR 320 students also examined the concept and strategies associated with visual literacy. Commonly defined as the ability to make meaning and to extract information from visual graphics, developing this skill set allows the user to extract information through visual analysis of given materials. Additionally, visual literacy is a skill set that is increasingly important in today's post-electronic environment (ACRL Visual Literacy Principles 2011). Thus, visual literacy principles are almost uniquely suited for teaching sequential art precisely because of the genre's diversity in format, purpose, and intended audience. Visual presentation in a graphic novel, comics, or comix combines a deliberate use of color, font, narrative choices, placement of objects, and depiction of characters – all of which say a great deal about the story's purpose and the

author's intention in creating the work (O'English 2009). In the LIBR 320 course, students read the seminal text *Understanding Comics*, written and illustrated by Scott McCloud, and reflected their understanding on online discussion boards. Furthermore, students completed a Visual Literacy Exercise, employing concepts from the ACRL Standards for Visual Literacy and from the McCloud text, to analyze a panel from a graphic novel.

Both the rise of underground comix and the increased representation of authors from historically marginalized groups in sequential art required an exploration of the concepts affiliated with multiculturalism – such as Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality of identity theory (McCall 2005) and Colwell-Chanthaphonh's (2009) concepts on indigenous ownership, authorship, and participation in cultural narratives (and though the latter scholar is an archaeologist, his discussions on cultural participation are invaluable for an analysis of any medium). Upon the introduction to these concepts, LIBR 320 students were then encouraged to ask critical questions about authorship, ownership, representation and/or participation, and privilege while reading graphic novels, comics, and/or comix.

Examining issues around identity (and identity construction) in the personal narratives found in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries*, Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*, or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, encouraged a stronger understanding of diverse worldviews. Through a deliberate and considered incorporation of diverse perspectives in sequential art into required course

materials, LIBR 320 students were connected to the experiences found in the LGBTQ communities, authors with disabilities, the experiences of a specific generation, and more. Furthermore, students were connected to sequential art from across the globe – such as Japanese manga, Korean manhwa, and India’s phenomenon of amar chitra katha (Rao 2001) – and invited to analyze these media with these important concepts in mind.

Lastly, students were introduced to the concepts of media literacy and to Marshall McLuhan’s theories of media and communication. While there is undoubtedly some overlap in disciplinary content between media studies and visual literacy, McLuhan’s seminal and influential concepts of hot vs. cool media; the tetrad of media effects; and figure and ground (Bobbitt 2011) all bear examination and discussion with regards to sequential art, especially given the burgeoning field of webcomics (McCloud 1994).

LIBR 320 Course Organization & Future Considerations

LIBR 320: Multiple Literacies through Graphic Novels, Comics, and Comix was taught at Western Washington University Libraries. The Western Libraries instruction program supports the academic programs of Western Washington University in addition to the Washington State goals of information literacy through an array of instructional services. The academic librarians engage in a combination of one-shot instruction, credit-bearing courses, and the unique First Year Experience programs. Furthermore, Western Libraries librarians have the freedom to design experimental courses and/or

focus on Special Topics. LIBR 320: Multiple Literacies through Graphic Novels, Comics and Comix is an example of a Special Topics course offered by the Western Libraries Instruction Program, and was generated from a curiosity (on the author's part) in the rapid growth and dissemination of sequential art forms within the United States. What follows is a brief and pragmatic overview of the course design, assignments, and learning outcomes.

LIBR 320 was a six week course taught during the Summer Quarter 2014 in an online environment. Student enrollment was lower than traditional research-oriented courses, due to the unique nature of the topic and the time at which the course was offered (Summer Quarters at Western Washington University traditionally experience lower rates of enrollment due to a smaller on-campus population). Thus, a total of twelve students enrolled in the course. For course texts, students were expected to purchase Scott McCloud's seminal text, *Understanding Comics*, and two additional graphic novels for the Final Project.

Coursework consisted of a midterm and a final exam; weekly responses to assigned readings on an online discussion board, along with constructive peer commentary (designed to enhance dialogue in a virtual environment); and two additional assignments – the Banned Graphic Novels Paper and the Visual Literacy Exercise. The first assignment, titled the Banned Graphic Novels Paper, was an exploratory essay where students selected a graphic novel, comic, or comix that had

been banned or challenged within the United States, and were instructed to a) summarize the origins and narrative around the banned text and b) to analyze the rationale given for attempting to censor this text. The purpose the Banned Graphic Novels Paper was to explore the concepts of intellectual freedom, censorship, and cultural norms, and how each of these concepts were involved in banning a specific text. The latter assignment, titled the Visual Literacy Exercise, asked students to select a single page from a graphic novel, comic, or comix, and to analyze the page using the concepts outlined in the McCloud text (1994) and McLuhan articles. The purpose of this assignment was to encourage students to assess documents in order to discern the author's intentions; to determine what choices the author made when including (and excluding) content; and the overall purpose of the communication presented on that page.

Lastly, students were expected to analyze two graphic novels using concepts introduced throughout LIBR 320, such as the "Toolbox Approach" to multiple literacies, gender representation, and intellectual freedom. Instead of composing a traditional research paper, students had to perform the research experience but chronicle their findings in a visually-based presentation to share with their peers in the class. Furthermore, to practice newfound skills in visual literacy, the students had to annotate their presentation with a rationale for each deliberate choice of the presentation's images, fonts, colors, and more – one last exercise in visual literacy.

Course evaluations consisted of online surveys, developed by the university's College for Extended Education. The course feedback was very positive, with an average course rating of 4.4 on a 0.0 – 5.0 Likert scale. Out of twelve comments given in the evaluations, eleven of these comments praised the course content and organization. The remaining comment was neutral, and urged for a slight revision to the course discussion methodology. In the commentary section of the student evaluations, one student wrote (John Doe 2014):

"...This course required students to read and analyze an often overlooked medium in a variety of different (and effective) ways. The articles [course readings] used to supplement understanding and spark discussion made me consider new ideas I may not have thought of before. The amount of work given also allowed for quick but effective learning."

Another student echoed these sentiments:

"The online lectures were really helpful for teaching the concepts we needed to analyze and understand comics or any other work for that matter. Resources provided for papers/exercises were helpful. The concept of all 3 of the projects [Banned Graphic Novel Paper, Visual Literacy Exercise, and the Final Project] were interesting and educational."

The unique focus of the course attracted many undergraduates who were admittedly interested in the medium, and that became apparent early on during the

quarter. However, every course – especially new ones – can be improved. Based upon the feedback received through the course, these course elements should be remembered in the future:

- *Course Content Organization*: Future iterations of LIBR 320 will continue to feature the Toolbox Approach to exploring multiple literacies. While the students were able to demonstrate, successfully, their understanding of the toolbox approach to multiple literacies through the LIBR 320 Final Project, some of the course content could be re-arranged and/or introduced at more strategic times during the quarter. For example, based upon expressed interest from several students, future iterations of LIBR 320 will introduce McLuhan's theories about media literacy earlier in the quarter.
- *Inclusion & Representation through Literature*: The choice of curriculum and textbook is one technique to promote inclusion and awareness of diverse voices in education, and this choice played a large role in the success of LIBR 320. Practicing inclusion in this instance meant selecting diverse materials from within the sequential art genre; furthermore, the selection of diverse materials promoted an open discussion for the need of examining all content from an intersectional identity perspective. This course element will undoubtedly continue in future iterations of LIBR 320.

- *Analysis by Annotation & Peer-Commenting:* As mentioned earlier in the article, LIBR 320 students had to chronicle their research experience in a visually-based Final Project presentation. Furthermore, each student had to annotate their finished presentation with a rationale for each deliberate choice of the presentation's software, images, fonts, colors, and more. The students responded very well to this instructional technique, using the opportunity to demonstrate both expertise and enthusiasm in their analysis. The request to both annotate *and* display their Final Project analysis increased their participation in the academic conversation that was already constructed in the assignment rubric because it invited a *dialogue* in addition to a *demonstration*.

Conclusions

Authors Stancato and Hamachek (1990) write that "Effective teaching...should encompass and emphasize the interactive nature of cognitive and affective learning...." The scholarly literature has long since demonstrated that sequential art does address these cognitive and affective learning needs. The genre, and its unique methods of content delivery, provides extensive opportunities to ask critical questions about content and purpose. Given the responses detailed in the student evaluations, and understanding that the successful completion of a course is only one metric by which to evaluate the merit of a credit course, it seems safe to say that the LIBR 320: Multiple Literacies through Graphic Novels, Comics and Comix was successful enough to warrant

being refined and taught again. Furthermore, the student feedback about individual LIBR 320 assignments – such as the Visual Literacy Exercise or the Banned Graphic Novel Paper – suggests that any of these assignments could be easily and effectively modified into single/one-time session instruction activities (such as bibliographic instruction, or online teaching tool).

Using the multiple literacies approach, with many of the literacy components being defined by seminal works in LIS literature, to examine sequential art was a marriage of sorts: This combination paired the versatility of the sequential art medium with crucial concepts found in information, visual, media, and multicultural literacy – all of which provides a unique perspective on the medium but also underscores the importance of literacy principles found within LIS literature. Furthermore, asking these critical questions, and through a series a structured assignments which are supplemented by course content, undergraduate students can develop a personal toolbox of skillsets that can be applied to any future academic endeavor.

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