

Go graphic: Create your own comics

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Moorefield-Lang, H.M. (2013). Go graphic: Create your own comics. *Knowledge Quest*, 41(3). 72-74.

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Abstract:

The article presents information on several online tools that can be used for creation of comics and graphic novels and their usage in teaching practices. It mentions that the websites help students in creation of characters, dialogues, and various situations which will help students to develop their story telling skills. It refers to a website located at www.pixton.com/create which helps in creation of comic characters and stories depiction according to the individual need of the educator.

Keywords: graphic novels | websites | school libraries | teaching aids | comic strips

Article:

CREATE YOUR OWN COMICS

The art we as readers know as comics have been in existence since the nineteenth century, around the same time as the earliest films and motion pictures began attracting attention (Meskin 2011). Comics have continued to grow in popularity with audiences both young and old. Graphic novels and comics are a wonderful mix of pictures and words for students who are visually oriented. Librarians have been collecting graphic novels for their collections in recent years because they recognize the importance of books that rely on sequential art (Crilley 2009). Comics and graphic novels are now used as a means for delivering entertainment, social and political commentary, and instruction. School librarians and other educators know that graphic novels and comics can be wonderful tools to motivate reluctant readers, engage multiple literacies, and draw in all types of learners (Gavigan 2012). These are also tools that can attract students to the act of writing. In this article, online tools for creating comics and graphic novels will be discussed, along with how these tools can be used in the classroom and school library.

Sites to Consider

Comic Master <www.comicmaster.org.uk>

Recently included in the AASL list of Best Websites for Teaching and Learning, Comic Master is an online tool intended for upper elementary and middle school students who want to create their own short graphic novels. Users can add backgrounds, create characters, and add dialogue, special effects, and more. Supported by Reading for Life and National School Partnership, this is an interactive site where students can write comics, share their work, and read the work of their peers. (Grades 5-8)

Strip Generator <<http://stripgenerator.com/strip/create>>

Strip Generator is one of the easiest comic-strip-creation tools to use. The comic strip template is provided immediately -- no sign up or log in. Students can then use the intuitive interface (see Figure 1) to create their own comic-strip stories, complete with characters and text, and have the option to add more frames. If students like their strips once they have been completed, young authors can sign in or create a login and save the creation as their own. (Grades 4-7)

Make Beliefs Comix <www.makebeliefscomix.com/Comix>

Make Beliefs Comix is another strip-based comic creator. Students title their comics and enter their names or initials to get started. Users can scroll through a host of different characters and write dialogue or thought balloons. Make Beliefs makes it really easy for users to add props, color, and new scene blocks to the comic strip. This is a very intuitive site (see Figure 2) that students will enjoy using. When the comics have been completed, teachers and school librarians can print or e-mail final pieces to share in class. The comics can be loaded into presentations or printed to be shared as part of a class bulletin board. (Grades 4-7)

Professor Garfield's Comics Lab <www.professorgarfield.org/pgf%5Fcomics%5Flab.html>

Complete with sound effects, Professor Garfield offers many different types of activities, one of which is Comics Lab. Another comic-strip creator, this site focuses solely on creating comics that feature Professor Garfield and his friends. Students click on a box in the comic strip, choose characters, props, backgrounds, and dialogue balloons. When finished, users can print and save. One of the options is to save as a JPG or PNG for embedding in presentations or documents. Professor Garfield's Comics Lab comes complete with videos and lessons for instruction and site integration for educators. (Grades 2-4)

Pixton <www.pixton.com/create>

Pixton is a comic- and graphic-novel-creation site. This website allows users to create their comics with a drag-and-drop interface. The definite draw to this site is the versatility. Students can create a one-row traditional strip comic, or they can move to the more advanced manga vertical style. They have the option to do a freestyle comic for which there are no rules, or they can move to the comic book/graphic novel. This site has a multitude of options. The work of fellow-artists is also shared on Pixton, so not only are students creating, but they are also able to read and gain ideas from the work of others. This site does require an e-mail sign in for

individual users. A fee-based option allows educators to set up an account for fifty students in a group. A thirty-day free trial is available. (Grades 7-10)

Using These Sites in Your Classroom and Library

Creating their own comics and graphic novels shows students that writing is not boring (Crilley 2009). Each of the sites listed in this article takes users step-by-step through the process of creating a story with a beginning, middle, and end. These sites and tools help students create characters, dialogue, locations, and situations, and aid students in the practice of storytelling. That is what comics can do; they can show young people how a story can be told (Lamb and Johnson 2009). Having students produce in these media not only allows them to explore the depths of their storytelling skills and creativity; these assignments also let students read the creations of their peers. It's incredibly affirming to have a fellow-student read and enjoy something that a student has written. Students will take pleasure in sharing these comics and graphic novels, and they will want to create more.

Going Professional

Using these sites, and incorporating the writing and reading of comics and graphic novels in the school library and classrooms is going to generate interest. You will discover talented writers and gifted artists in your school! Group projects and partnerships are always a good idea. These assignments might inspire young artists and writers to enter the field of comic-book and graphic-novel writing and illustration. When you hear students talk about the possibility of pursuing these careers, you can pass along some information from a professional in the field.

J. Torres (see Figure 4) has been writing professionally in the comics industry for ten years, and before that he wrote for at least five years while holding down "day jobs." When asked if he had any words of wisdom for students thinking about becoming comic or graphic-novel writers J. had this to say, "The best advice I can give is to keep writing, keep drawing, and keep reading comics. We learn through practice and by observing others. It's the best way to get better at something, pick up on what's good and even what not to do, and all the while enjoy what you're doing" (2012).

J. has written in various genres ranging from slice-of-life and comedy like the Jinx series for Archie Comics to superheroes like the Teen Titans Go series for DC Comics, or a combination of the two like the Power Lunch series for Oni Press, as well as adventure and fantasy like the Alison Dare series and Avatar the Last Airbender comics, horror or suspense like Lola: A Ghost Story, and even funny animals and fables like the web-comic Funnies Farm or the new digital-comic Aesop's Ark. When asked what inspired him to write for this genre J. stated, "I've been reading comics for as long as I can remember. They entertained me and inspired me as a child. I guess I simply wanted to entertain and inspire other people in the same way" (2012).

Out of the selection of sites listed in this article, J. has used only Strip Generator thus far. He thinks it's great for someone like him who can't draw all that well. He recommends that even if you're a good artist, as long as you know your way around the features and functions, you can create some terrific-looking comics. It's easy and fun and very useful.

Developing Skills While Having Fun

As librarians and educators we are always looking for new ways to introduce reading and writing to our students. Creating their own comics and graphic novels lets students tell and share their own stories in a highly visual and exciting way. Whether it's with paper and pencil or with one of these exciting Web 2.0 tools, students will enjoy sharing their stories through a graphic medium.

PHOTO (COLOR): Figure 1. Strip Generator's user interface.

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PHOTO (COLOR): Figure 2. Make Beliefs Comix user interface.

FIGURE 2 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

PHOTO (COLOR): Figure 3. Examples of strips created with Pixton.

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PHOTO (COLOR): Figure 4. Author J. Torres with one of his graphic novels.

FIGURE 4 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

HERE ARE A FEW IDEAS:

1. When doing a report about a person or family member, have students do the research or investigation, gather the materials, and report their research in a sequential-art form (Lamb and Johnson 2009).
2. Have current students introduce the school to new students through a graphic handbook that includes all the rules, as well as advice from older students.
3. Encourage students to create their own "comic-strip story of me." This could be a strip telling about a great day in each student's life, or a great day from the current school year, or a day they would like to have, etc. Then have a wall of comic strips where students can share.
4. Work on instructional comics that show how something should be done. Have students instruct others in a step-by-step, beginning, middle and end method of how a process should be completed. Any type of instruction will work. Howtoons <www.howtoons.com> is a great example of this type of comic.

Students will take pleasure in sharing these comics and graphic novels, and they will want to create more.

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Heather Moorefield-Lang is the education and applied social sciences librarian at Virginia Tech. She is the former chair of the AASL Best Websites for Teaching and Learning Committee and now serves on the AASL Research and Statistics Committee. Her research focuses on technology in libraries and arts in libraries. To read more about her work, see her website at <www.actinginthelibrary.com> or follow her on Twitter: @actinginthelib.