Building Capacity for Research and Teaching with Comics and Graphic Art

Abstract

San Diego State University (SDSU) requests a National Leadership Grant (Community Catalyst) of $148,698, to be expended over 2 years (2021-23) to develop and convene a National Forum designed to: 1) establish a robust network of research libraries using comics and graphic materials to promote innovations in learning, scholarship, and community engagement; 2) facilitate campus and community partnerships around the use of comics and graphic materials, including academic librarians and faculty, public librarians, K-12 teachers and librarians, museums, and creators; 3) explore opportunities to promote social justice education through teaching with comics and graphic materials; and, 4) share expertise, model programs, and activities developed in collaboration among the SDSU Comics Working Group and the Digital Humanities Initiative.

National Need

More than 75 years ago, Gruenberg (1944) described comic books as an emergent medium in U.S. culture and a "social force" that could be employed to support education. In the decades since, comics have become deeply embedded in popular culture, and are read and shared (in print and digital form) among people of all ages and backgrounds. HBO's recent Emmy-winning *Watchmen* series has shown that comics can also be an essential tool for promoting discussions of racial equity and social justice (Nussbaum, 2019). As Yang (2003) documented, comics have found an increasingly significant role in K-12 and higher education and have also proven to be a locus for student organizing around intellectual freedom (Borelli, 2013). Nascent efforts to establish greater collaboration among libraries in the collection of comics and graphic materials, e.g., ALA's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table, have only highlighted the *unmet need* to coordinate and promote the use of comics in teaching at all levels, and to support the development and use of research collections of comics and graphic materials. Additionally, traditional categorizing of comics as leisure reading spotlights the *unmet need* for a national dialogue about the collection and use of comics in programs that support innovations in K-12 and higher education, e.g., through the intersection of comics with initiatives promoting primary source literacy, visual literacy, and digital scholarship. Finally, there is an *unmet need* for a harnessing of collaborative endeavors by educational institutions, cultural heritage organizations, creators, publishers, local communities

Project Description, Plan, and Design

The goal of this project is to foster productive partnerships among research libraries, teaching faculty, K-12 educators, and partners in the creator, publisher, and fan communities to promote innovative practices in learning, scholarship, and engagement through comics and graphic materials. Assembling leading research library collections, teaching faculty, and partners from the K-12, public library, museum, creator, and communities, our project will extend existing discussions of the use of primary source materials in K-20 education, partnerships among libraries, archives, and museums, and digital humanities teaching and scholarship. With a specific focus on racial equity and social justice education, participants will develop a detailed plan for using comics in support of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, and explore models for teaching, learning, and community-centered collaboration around the study of urgent social issues through comics, graphic arts, and digital humanities scholarship.

As the lead institution for this project, SDSU is uniquely situated to provide an unmatched array of scholarly infrastructure and opportunities for regional community engagement. Located in San Diego, home to the Comic-Con International Convention, SDSU faculty and librarians have *already* established partnerships with local K-12 schools, public libraries, and the publisher, creator, and fan communities. Moreover, the university's vibrant Comics Working Group and Digital Humanities Initiative have demonstrated the potential for multi-disciplinary teaching and scholarship using comics, as well as opportunities to employ digital humanities tools to advance student learning. This project is projected to be conducted in two phases: 1) needs assessment, network analysis and collection mapping, and model instruction (2021-22); and, 2) national forum (2022-23).

The National Forum will be conducted by participants in four meetings, and progress will be shared throughout the library, K-12, higher education, and creator communities through the development of a forum website, social media channels, and digital programming, e.g., podcasts, author/teacher talks. Formal dissemination of results will include a White Paper to be shared through the website, and conference presentations to be developed for the library community, scholarly community, and creator community. Additional goals are to: 1) develop sustainable partnerships and collaborations among academic institutions supporting comic and graphic art collections for research purposes; and, 2) share programs, activities, and learning objects developed by the SDSU Comics Working Group and Digital Humanities Initiative, and project partners with colleagues in order to suggest a model for research-based engagement with comics and community partners that can be adapted for use in other regions of the country.

National Forum Meetings
Four facilitated work meetings will be held, in a combination of face-to-face and virtual formats. Our hybrid approach to forum development increases accessibility to the discussion and ensures project resilience in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Invitations will be based on potential contributions to project goals and opportunities to ensure representation among stakeholders. Meetings will be facilitated by members of the SDSU project team and members of a national advisory committee to be established prior to project start. **Meeting 1** will be held at SDSU in conjunction with San Diego Comic Fest (TBA; Spring 2022) and include Comics Studies scholars, comics collection curators, and representatives of the K-12, public library, and creator communities with the goals of sharing and envisioning best practices in the use of comics in learning and scholarship, and articulating opportunities for community-based collaboration in the design and delivery of learning-centered comics programming. **Meeting 2** will be held virtually during Summer 2022, and will include librarians from libraries of all types as well as LIS educators with an interest in comics librarianship and social justice in LIS education with the goal of outlining opportunities for collaboration among libraries of different types in a community-centered, lifelong learning context with a focus on the use of comics in EDI initiatives and social justice education. **Meeting 3**, also to be held virtually, and in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Comics Studies Society (TBA; Summer/Fall 2022), will build on the results of the network analysis and collection mapping completed in phase one to further articulate an agenda for research library services supporting innovation in the use of comics for learning, scholarship, and engagement. **Meeting 4** will be held at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State University, in conjunction with the ACRL National Meeting (Spring 2023) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with the goal of establishing a sustainable network for collaboration among comics collections in research libraries, exploration of connections between comics scholarship and digital humanities scholarship, and sharing of progress and best practices gleaned from earlier meetings.

Outcomes
Among the expected outcomes of this project are the following: 1) completion of a network analysis of Comics Studies scholarship and collections that can be employed in academic program planning and sharing of expertise at the national level; 2) establishment of a network of research libraries supporting Comics Studies through their collections; 3) a framework for community-based collaboration among libraries of all types, K-12 and postsecondary educators, creators, and publishers on the development of learning materials centered on the use of comics in lifelong learning; 4) a framework for exploring the intersections of Comics Studies and digital humanities scholarship in libraries; and, 5) dissemination of a white paper and other media (e.g., website, podcasts) drawn from the National Forum meetings to foster the adoption of best practices identified through the project by local partners in communities across the nation.

Impact
This project will jumpstart a critical conversation around research library strategies for collecting comics and employing them as a distinctive component of library support for innovation in teaching and scholarship. Given the opportunities to employ comics as components in discussions of racial equity and social justice, research library investment in comics collections and services promises opportunity to contribute to broader strategic goals of host universities and facilitate community-centered education and engagement with urgent social issues. Finally, this project will foster sustainable partnerships among library types in a shared educational and outreach mission to include, among others, intellectual freedom, information literacy, visual literacy, and digital literacy, and will also provide models for emergent best practices that can be applied to support innovative programming at local and regional levels.

Project Team and Advisors
The project will be led by an SDSU team drawing on complementary expertise in library special collections, comics studies teaching and scholarship, digital humanities, and scholarly comics publishing, including Pam Jackson, Beth Pollard, and Pamella Lach, and supported by senior leadership in the University Library and College of Arts and Letters. They will be joined by faculty in the Comics Working Group and Digital Humanities Initiative, including Jessica Pressman and William Nericcio.

Budget
This two-year project budget total is $148,698. The proposed budget includes $89,162 for personnel, $30,776 for supporting attendance at the in-person meetings in the National Forum, and $28,760 in indirect cost recovery for the host institution.

Selected References
Gruenberg, S. M. (1944). The comics as a social force. *Journal of Educational Sociology 18* (4), 204-13.
Nussbaum, E. (2019, December 9). The incendiary aims of HBO's "Watchmen." *New Yorker*. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/12/09/the-incendiary-aims-of-hbos-watchmen
Yang, G. (2003). *History of comics in education*. Retrieved from https://www.geneyang.com/comicsedu/history.html