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Legends of the Library Ninjas: New Frontiers in Library Instruction

Heidi Blackburn
Kansas State University-Salina

Kate Wise
Kansas Wesleyan University

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Librarians can become disheartened when carefully prepared handouts go in the recycle bin, or are left on chairs and tables when an instruction session ends. The realization that the instruction has become stale is even more discouraging. Recognizing a need for innovative library instruction after reading Matt Upson and Michael Hall's *Library of the Living Dead*, and experiencing such student apathy towards their own instruction, the librarians from Kansas State University Salina and Kansas Wesleyan University were inspired to collaborate to create a graphic novel to use as part of library instruction since neither of us felt we could tackle this project alone. The goal was to create something unique, memorable, and that would give the reader the impression the library can be fun and lighthearted, while teaching basic research skills to encourage lifelong learning. This article will discuss the history and execution of the project, present survey results from both before and after using the graphic novel as part of library instruction, and look at the future of the project.



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Driving Towards New Frontiers

Legends of the Library Ninjas: New Frontiers in Library Instruction

Heidi Blackburn
Kansas State University - Salina
Salina, Kansas

Kate Wise
Kansas Wesleyan University
Salina, Kansas

Abstract

Librarians can become disheartened when carefully prepared handouts go in the recycle bin, or are left on chairs and tables when an instruction session ends. The realization that the instruction has become stale is even more discouraging. Recognizing a need for innovative library instruction after reading Matt Upson and Michael Hall's *Library of the Living Dead*, and experiencing such student apathy towards their own instruction, the librarians from Kansas State University Salina and Kansas Wesleyan University were inspired to collaborate to create a graphic novel to use as part of library instruction since neither of us felt we could tackle this project alone. The goal was to create something unique, memorable, and that would give the reader the impression the library can be fun and lighthearted, while teaching basic research skills to encourage lifelong learning. This article will discuss the history and execution of the project, present survey results from both before and after using the graphic novel as part of library instruction, and look at the future of the project.

Literature Review

Comic books and graphic novels have had a presence in libraries for at least 20 years. Early on, Robin Johnson (1990) identified three major categories for comics or graphic novels: commercial series following familiar themes, independently published comics, and comics from Europe and Japan, including manga. By 2006, O'English, Matthews, and Lindsay (2006) defined the term *graphic novel* as a label for the format, rather than a particular genre. While the article is primarily aimed at libraries considering collecting graphic novels, the transition of graphic novels from the comic format to a mainstream literary genre is important. In a pamphlet produced in 2006 by the ALA, National Coalition Against Censorship, and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, graphic novels cover "every conceivable genre." Libraries have an important role to play as graphic novels transition into a respected literary form. Toren (2009) argues "[it] is the place of academic librarians to ... invite more people into that growing audience that respects rather than stereotypes the [graphic novel]." Specifically, Toren addresses the possible objections to "superhero" graphic novels in an academic library, arguing librarians are responsible for educating patrons about the legitimacy of graphic novels as literature.

As graphic novels become a serious literary form, the next step is to consider graphic novels as teaching tools. To this end, "[a] key idea ... is that graphic novels present the reader with not only ideas ... but also images" (Heaney, 2007). Heaney notes two reasons to collect graphic novels for use as learning tools that combine learning styles; they address multiple intelligences, and are helpful for visually dependent students and reluctant readers. Downey (2009) takes the idea further, arguing graphic novels are "perceived as less threatening by overwhelmed students ... [and] can help them grasp the meaning of the content ... and be more motivated to read." She concludes by stating, "What was once disregarded as a lower form of literature has evolved into pop culture artifact, then into a tool to lure the reluctant reader, and now a medium to increase literacy, comprehension, knowledge, and creative thinking." An article in *Business Communication Quarterly* from 2009 suggests:

One potential idea is to create a textbook in the graphic novel format...creating a storyline where character and plot developments are illustrated ... For example, a text could develop a story where an entrepreneur develops a business plan, pitches the business plan to generate startup capital, and then uses funds to start the enterprise and hire/train employees. Thus, a running character ... could work through a plotline incorporating all entrepreneurial processes..." (Short).

This brings us to the catalyst for our project; Upson and Hall's (2011) *Library of the Living Dead*. In an article for C&RL News, they said, "We simply saw an immediate need, recognized our ability to create a fun and unique resource...and moved forward. ... Innovative, tailored unique resources can promote the vitality of an institution and encourage high quality prospective students and staff to seek out that place for their education or potential job."

Producing Our Graphic Novel

As we wanted the final product to be a professional-looking graphic novel worth the effort of producing it, the first task we faced was finding an artist. Initially, Kate contacted the Kansas Wesleyan University (KWU) Art Department in spring 2011 to find a student looking for a senior or side project, but this fell through. In June of 2011, Heidi met Kansas State University Salina (K-State Salina) student Greg Charland browsing the library's graphic novels. Heidi mentioned the project, and discovered he was also a graphic artist. He sketched a few characters based on ideas we had already discussed, and we were so impressed we scheduled a meeting to talk through general ideas for the project. However, we wanted to respect his time and talent as an artist, so before we went any further, we needed to secure funding.

In September 2011, we wrote a grant for the Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF), awarded through the Student Governing Association for the K-State Salina campus, but it fell through. We also wrote a proposal that fall for the Academic Excellence Fund (AEF), a university-wide grant from Kansas State University for one-time project costs contributing to academic excellence. As the semester was ending,

we had not heard back from the AEF, so we started revising our timeline as well as looking into other funding options. However, just before the end of the semester, we were awarded the full \$3500 we had asked for in the grant. By this time, we had a basic outline ready and met again with Greg to finish the story line so he could start on the artwork over the holiday break. Shortly before spring break, Greg showed us pencil sketches for most of the pages, while we wrote the copy for the second, non-illustrated half of the graphic novel. There was some concern over meeting the deadline in time to order proof copies from the printer before the next academic year, but we stayed on top of the project. We had the files completed in time to order a proof copy by the end of May, and put in the orders for the first print runs by June. We used a print-on-demand graphic novel publisher, ComixPress, to produce the graphic novel and were satisfied with the results. Both campuses ordered print runs separately during the 2012 summer session. Heidi also set up online access to the graphic novel through Issuu, so we could track online analytics and provide free electronic access to the graphic novel, available at <http://dft.ba/-/libraryninjas>.

In the past, Heidi and Kate have collaborated on presentations and articles with no formal agreements. Even though the graphic novel was a bigger project, there was no anticipation of needing anything formal until K-State Salina administration expressed interest in obtaining a legal copyright to market the graphic novel. As a science and engineering research institution, such legal documents are standard protocol for the creation of new methods and instruments in these fields, but were not something we had considered, primarily because it was not a full-length text and because we were more interested in dispersing the content than safeguarding royalties. Before we knew about the university's interest in obtaining the legal copyright, we had planned to put both our school logos on the cover of the graphic novel, but in order for K-State Salina to distributed the graphic novel on campus, KWU's logo would have to be removed. After meetings over the phone and in person, we took the weekend to re-think and clarify our purposes and intent for the graphic novel. We both decided that course of action was against our personal and professional library philosophies to seek profit for this project. Additionally, Kate had a written document stating our intention to collaborate, which was signed by Kate, Heidi, the KWU library director and the KWU provost, satisfying both institutions.

Using Our Graphic Novel

Once we had the graphic novel online and in print, we introduced it to students and the campus community. At the K-State Salina campus, the graphic novel was announced on their Facebook page, Twitter, and library blog, and through marketing outlets on other campuses. Advance copies were given to the admissions and public relations offices, the writing center, and to academic advising. Next to the library entrance, a presentation was set up in a display case introducing the graphic novel. During the library's portion of new student orientation, 90 copies of the graphic novel were passed out with an invitation to a Ninja Party, and a link to the electronic version of the graphic novel was made available on the library website.

At KWU, an email introducing the graphic novel was sent to the faculty, and the public relations office. An announcement was made on the college's home page, with a corresponding news/blog post on the college website and a link to the e-book version on Memorial Library's homepage as well. A display about the graphic novel was put in the library's main display case. For freshmen and new students for the fall semester at KWU, the college requires students to enroll in Wesleyan Challenge, a class designed to help students learn college skills and transition to college life. Memorial Library was able to use one class period of the course to introduce the graphic novel and use it in library instruction of basic bibliographic skills.

Assessing Our Graphic Novel

We distributed surveys both before introducing the graphic novel, and after using it as part of bibliographic instruction. The pre-survey was to gauge attitudes towards using graphic novels as textbooks, handbooks, and as part of library instruction. Surveys were also distributed after we introduced the graphic novel and used as part of library instruction, and measured attitudes towards the graphic novel as a handbook, the effectiveness of the graphic novel as a teaching tool in library instruction, and opinions of the graphic novel itself.

K-State Salina distributed the first round of pre-surveys to a Literature & Society class in spring 2011, and also surveyed patrons at the reference desk, and 83 survey responses were collected. In spring 2012, Kansas Wesleyan sampled two behavioral science professors' classes, where 72 survey responses were collected.

Table 1		
<i>Pre-introduction of graphic novel survey results</i>		
Percentage of respondents	Kansas State University Salina	Kansas Wesleyan University
Freshman	49%	44%
Self-identified Male/Female	56/41	31/40
Listing a small to large amount of previous experience with graphic novels.	35%	53%
Reported optimistic feelings towards using a graphic novel as a handbook.	66%	54%
Reported encouraging feelings towards using a graphic novel instead of a textbook in courses.	60%	69%

Since we planned to focus on freshmen and new students as users of the graphic novel, having a greater ratio of freshmen to other classes was important. We were encouraged to find almost half of the participants had some experience reading graphic novels. We asked about using a graphic novel as a textbook or a handbook, to see if this would affect students' attitudes about using a graphic novel in the classroom and the overall responses between graphic novel as handbook or textbook were largely positive.

In the fall 2012 semester, K-State Salina distributed the second survey to students who came to the Ninja Party and to students in enrolled in Unmanned Aerial Systems, Chemistry, and two sections of Expository Writing II classes as part of library instruction, with 49 total responses. Also in the fall 2012 semester, Kansas Wesleyan distributed the second surveys to the Wesleyan Challenge class, where 115 total responses were collected.

Table 2		
<i>Post-introduction of graphic novel survey results</i>		
Percentage of respondents	Kansas State University Salina	Kansas Wesleyan University
Freshman	39%	98%
Self-identified Male/Female	33/16	70/20
Identified the most useful Boolean search string for hypothetical research situation.	80%	83%
Identified the online catalog as the method for finding books in the library.	57%	64%
Identified "inter-library loan" as the service through which the library borrows materials from other libraries.	49%	73%
Rated the graphic novel as "awesome" or "pretty cool."	84%	65%

At both schools, the graphic novel was used in basic library instruction new students receive from the librarians. Of the three questions on library instruction, a majority of students identified the best Boolean search string; over half understood the library catalog was the best tool for locating books in the library; and around half identified inter-library loan as the service for borrowing books from other libraries; well over half of the respondents had encouraging opinions of the graphic novel.

Lessons Learned and the Future

While graphic novels have a place in libraries, and even a place in library instruction, this project is one of the first to collect empirical data about the process and there are a few limitations in the project that need to be addressed. While we assessed student opinions of graphic novels before and after introducing the project, we did not carry out any library instruction assessment without the graphic novel as a control session, because this would have been harmful to student success. Also, while we followed similar library instruction methods, and covered most of the same information, we did not follow a common lesson plan at both universities.

Use of the graphic novel will likely continue, and more data will be collected for analysis. After the graphic novel was highlighted in *Library Journal* (Schwartz, 2012), we received a lot of encouragement from the profession, complimenting us on the product and even encouraging us to produce a Library of Congress version for use by other universities (The current version teaches the Dewey Decimal, the system used by both institutions). However, one challenge we face will be funding, as the grant used for the project and print runs were a one-time grant. If the project is deemed a success by university administrators, we will explore further funding options. The use of the graphic novel over more than one year also offers us the opportunity for better library branding in the future, allowing us to put an energetic, helpful face to the library.

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Heidi Blackburn is the Undergraduate Services Librarian at Kansas State University-Salina Library, Salina, Kansas.

Kate Wise is the Associate Librarian at Kansas Wesleyan University, Salina, Kansas.