

**Comics Go Global: Reporting on a 4-year transnational pilot project**

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## Comics Go Global: Reporting on a 4-year transnational pilot project

While the migration of people and ideas across the globe is not a new phenomenon, the opportunities for knowledge exchange are now unprecedented because of the increase in digital technologies and platforms. The idea of transnationalism in education encompasses a fluid, constant flow and shift over spaces: over and through geography, cultures, cosmopolitanism, and virtual space (Beck and Sznaider). From a learning perspective, transnationalism can be transformative, not just for individuals but also the people and places through which they circulate (Rizvi and Lingard). This article describes the use of comic books and graphic novels to foster reading and writing in middle years' (years 5-9) online classrooms within the pilot project Comics Go Global. Using a well-researched framework for designing and delivering online courses as a conceptual basis, this pilot lasted from 2011 to 2014, and involved 5 educational staff and 160 students across 3 continents. Participants were connected via online tools including a 'locked-down' social network, discussion boards, blogs, and chats, as well as video conferencing, to establish a collaborative, cosmopolitan network. Their comic books were exhibited in a roped-off area of Second Life. Results suggest that the model developed for Comics Go Global had positive outcomes for students, including the acquisition of subject knowledge and skills such as collaboration, critical and creative thinking, and the ability to empathise with others. Comics Go Global stands an example of an inclusive, flexible model for those individuals and institutions wishing to explore the possibilities of transnationalism and education. The pilot study's findings, including recommendations for improvement, will underpin the research team's development of a raft of other projects using the 'CGG model', and may also be of use to other education providers who are attempting to foster transnational student collaboration within the online environment.

Keywords: online learning; transnationalism; globalisation; distance learning; collaboration; literacy; comics

### 1. Introduction

In her Melbourne-based arts project *Culture Shack* (Harris), rap music provided an entry point to explore the complexities of identity formation amongst former refugees from within the Sudanese community. After witnessing the transformative nature of this project, Harris called for 'innovative pedagogies that are able to integrate creativity, collaboration and culture, and offer formal credit in return' (Harris 134). With its disruptive technologies, rejection of traditional nation-state boundaries, and cosmopolitan ethos, transnationalism has the potential to create just such a paradigm shift in education. If this paradigm shift is going to come to pass, however, we must be willing to re-imagine learner interconnectivity (Rizvi), learning spaces (Bhabha), the roles of teacher and learner, and curriculum diversity (Huber, Murphy and Clandinin). The educational projects we create must cater for, and ultimately celebrate, diversity of race, nationality, religion, age, physical ability, gender, and gender orientation. Comics Go Global (CGG), an online collaborative arts-based project, suggests one way that curriculum development and delivery may take advantage of this new era in educational development.

Transnationalism can be seen as an idea capable of inducing new ways for seeing oneself and for interconnectedness in social, political, cultural, and economic domains and networks. Concepts of hybridity—multifaceted identities and diversity, real or virtual—today are driven by economic and educational opportunity, personal aspiration, and often facilitated through online technology (Vertovec). Transnationalism enables the movement of people and ideas across time, space, territorial, personal, physical, and virtual distance. This convergence and interconnectedness indicates the capacity to reframe concepts such as ‘here’ and ‘there’, and personal and territorial identity, as well as concepts around formal and informal education.

Despite the reality of transnationalism in the modern age, most schools around the world ignore the interconnectivity between people in different places. The grip of a nineteenth-century learning model still persists: rows of desks, worn textbooks, a lecturer in front of the class. As the world goes digital and communication networks go global, a new vision for education is required. Classrooms no longer need walls. Students no longer need to be constricted by traditional, physical, nor even international barriers to learning. Educators need to become instructional designers rather than content deliverers. In essence, there is a need for a new transnational learning model and platform that simultaneously connects learners around the world and caters to each individual learner’s needs.

Like Harris’s work with rap music (Harris), the CGG curriculum was designed to engage students through the use of popular culture, in this case comic books and graphic novels. Through the analysis and creation of these ‘sequential images’ (Eisner), the research team sought to develop students’ written, visual and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) literacy skills, in keeping with the aims of the curriculum frameworks of participating nations, namely Australia, the United States, and England. While course content and technological platforms were chosen to ensure access and, therefore, equity for all (Dewey), the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer) was adopted as a conceptual model and touchstone throughout the development and delivery process in order to ensure that the project would utilise the online environment to its fullest.

In his seminal work, *Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art*, comic book artist and theorist Scott McLeod defined comics as ‘juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response from the viewer’ (McLeod 9). Reading and interpreting comic books requires students to understand the traditional elements of narrative, such as plot, character, theme and dialogue, while they consider a range of visual elements including inking, colouring, shading, perspective, and the style of the lettering (Schwarz). It is the unique combination of features that make comics such a rich multimodal text choice for students in the middle years of schooling, one that requires ‘multiple literacies’ to be fully appreciated (Jacobs 21).

Students in the middle years of schooling (years 5 – 9) are far from a homogenous group, particularly when they come from very different parts of the world. However, comics have been shown to be effective in getting students to confront a range of serious or controversial subjects including the hardships of city life (Frey and Fisher), sexual abuse (Carter; Versaci), immigrant experiences (Boatright) and the holocaust (Carter; Versaci; Chun). They have also been used with diverse student cohorts, including reluctant readers (Versaci), deaf students (Smetana et al.), English Language learners (Chun) and recent immigrants (Boatright). This success may be due, in part, to what is known as ‘visual permanence’: the same comic book can be read

slowly by one reader and quickly by the next, accommodating self-paced learning (Yang 188).

Frey and Fisher used graphic novels and Manga to teach 32 ninth-graders about the mechanics of writing. The cohort consisted of a mixture of English-language students and native English speakers, from one of San Diego's most economically depressed neighbourhoods. Eschewing traditional notions of remedial skills instruction, the researchers focused on using popular culture to 'invite students into school literacy' (Frey and Fisher 24). After successfully establishing a dialogue with students about the first section of a short story presented in comic book format, Frey and Fisher had each student create an ending in words. They repeated this activity a number of times, focusing on plot, dialogue, mood, tone, and the expression that students used to convey their ideas. As a result, the students produced work of a higher standard than usual, and demonstrated an improved ability to reflect upon their own work and the work of their peers.

These findings are echoed by others, including Author 3, who established the Comic Book Project primarily as a means of assisting urban, underprivileged youth in New York City to develop their literacy skills while giving them an authentic outlet for self-expression. Between October and December 2002, he worked with educators to assist 733 upper elementary and middle school students to create their own comic books. He was struck by the pride that students took in their work, editing words and images to better convey their intended meaning: 'Mechanical errors were fixed, story structures were tightened, and character voices were honed' (Author 3 585). Those who appeared to benefit most from the experience were those with limited English proficiency, who told their stories – often of their recent arrival to America – mostly through images.

Based upon this experience, Author 3 saw the potential to take the Comic Book Project to the next level, allowing students from around the world could work together to create comic books. However, he required the assistance of educators with experience in the design and delivery of online courses to make this vision a reality. He approached Author 2 and Author 1 with this concept. At the time, Author 2 was a practicing artist with exhibitions in Melbourne and New York, while Author 1 had had four novels for teenagers published. They had been working together to create a children's picture book, which had honed their understanding of how the creative process can be enhanced through collaboration. Both had many years' experience in the face-to-face and distance education systems, and saw the potential for the Comic Book Project to provide the basis for rich project-based work that could be delivered to a global audience online. Author 3, Author 2 and Author 1 (the research team) began working together to make the transition from print to online delivery in 2011. Together, they founded Comics Go Global, which they intended to be a voluntary, extra-curricular arts-based project that would run twice a year for 7 weeks at a time.

In order to develop a curriculum that they believed could assist in fostering meaningful collaboration, it was necessary to go beyond the researcher team's personal experience to investigate best-practice strategies that could be applied to such a project. It was here that Author 2's and Author 1's experience in designing and delivering distance education curricula came to the fore. Because of the physical divide between Australian distance education students, promoting communication and collaboration activities has traditionally been a major challenge (Fahraeus). At the Distance Education Centre Victoria (DECV), attempts to bridge this 'digital divide' had recently expanded to include the use of the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer) to improve online curriculum design and delivery. In 2011, three DECV

teachers used the CoI framework to redevelop their online courses, changing curriculum materials as well as their own teaching practice in an attempt to create ‘a community of inquiry where students are fully engaged in collaboratively constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge’ (Garrison 25).

The Community of Inquiry framework was established as a way to evaluate the success of an online course in promoting three overlapping forms of ‘presence’, ‘cognitive presence’, ‘teaching presence’, and ‘social presence’, as shown in Figure 1. Cognitive presence relates to the tasks set the course instructor; teaching presence refers to the student’s perception of their teacher; and social presence refers to the perceived interaction between the student and other student participants, as well as the student’s ability to project their own personality into the online environment. When combined, these describe a student’s level of satisfaction with a course.

**Figure 1:** Elements of an educational experience (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 88)



As reported elsewhere (Author 1, Author 1 and Chambers), as a result of this intervention, these DECV teachers witnessed significant changes in student behaviour, including increased participation in online discussions, and a greater sense of understanding and empathy between students. These results were even more pronounced in the one course that utilised a blended (online and face-to-face seminars) as its mode of delivery, suggesting that face-to-face contact was highly valued by participants. Based upon these findings, the CoI framework was adopted by the CGG research team as the theoretical model that would underpin student collaboration within this pilot project.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

In the first year of the pilot, only students from Victoria (Australia) and New Jersey (United States) were involved. Author 2 and Author 1 recruited and managed 2 students from the DECV, who were based around Victoria, while Author 3 recruited and managed 3 high school students in New Jersey with the support of Westfield, NJ

Public Library. All students within this first cohort were recruited based upon their ability to access the online tools required to participate (Adobe Connect for synchronous communications and Ning for asynchronous communications) as well as their stated interest in the aims of the pilot, namely working with students from around the world to analyse and create comic books.

When the pilot reached its second year, two other schools came on board: the Cairns School of Distance Education, which services students in Australia's 'top end'; and Ecclesfield School, Sheffield, which specialises in visual and performing arts. In Cairns, the teacher who volunteered to roll out CGG had experience in teaching both English and Art, and wanted to participate because she saw the need for promoting a sense of connectedness between her students, many of whom she felt were physically and socially isolated. In Sheffield, the participating educator was the school's resource officer/librarian, who had founded a UK-based competition, The Excelsior Awards, which celebrated the year's best graphic novels as voted by students; he viewed CGG as a potential bridge between student interests and the school's literacy aspirations.

The pilot project began in February 2011, and concluded in December 2014. Throughout this period, the recruitment of students remained consistent with its original conception: students were invited to participate in CGG based upon their enrolment in one of the participating schools and their interest in the project. During the pilot, the number of student participants grew from just five in the first year, to more than 25 students per round in later iterations, totalling 160 students over four years. Their year levels ranged from year 7 to 12 (ages 12-18 approximately), and students were welcomed into the program regardless of traditional academic measures such as grade point averages and previous teacher reports, in an attempt to create an egalitarian workspace and give students a 'fresh start'. This meant that, in some cases, students who participated in CGG would usually have been part of 'remedial' classes, but were not identified as such unless they volunteered this information.

## 2.2 Procedure

This arts-based educational pilot programme was structured around two distinct yet interconnected features: curriculum, and communications. In order to ensure that the curriculum was clearly aligned with the CoI framework, the research team utilised a curriculum design checklist developed by Author 1 for use in his previous study at the DECV, which has been written about elsewhere (Author 1, Author 1 and Chambers). Based the CoI Survey Instrument (Arbaugh et al.), a 34-item questionnaire designed to measure a student's perception of their educational experience, this checklist contained 22 tips for teachers to use when developing activities for their courses: ten related to cognitive presence, six to teaching presence, and six to social presence.

The curriculum began with activities to familiarize students with the comic book genre, before moving them through a planning process focusing on the major elements of telling a story within a comic, including designing characters, a plot, and setting, and deciding upon the optimal ratio of words to pictures. After creating their own three-page comic book, each student shared their creation with the group, which gave them a chance to reflect on their creative process. This curriculum is outlined, in brief, in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Comics Go Global Curriculum, February 2011

Week 1	Getting to Know You	Tell us a bit about yourself, and learn about the 'building blocks' of comics.
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Week 2	Can you judge a book by its cover?	Explore the world of cover designs, and design your own comic book cover to 'hook' your reader.
Week 3	Develop your characters	How to use their actions, reactions, and interactions to bring your characters to life.
Week 4	Create a compelling story	What is the difference between a series of events and a story, and how can you use this knowledge to keep your readers reading?
Week 5	Sketching in pencil	This week, you will be clarifying your visual style, and storyboarding your three-page comic. Then you can begin drawing for real.
Week 6	Inking your creation	Now that you know what you want your comic book to look like, it's time to enhance it through some well-chosen lines.
Week 7	Colouring and lettering	It's time to put the finishing touches on your comic book, adding colour where appropriate, and making sure that those word balloons really 'sing'.
Week 8	Celebrating your achievements	After seven weeks' work, it's time to unveil your creation, and share it with your audience!

During the 7 weeks in which each cohort participated in the project, they met their teachers and other students from around the world once a week using Adobe Connect, Skype, or Google Hangouts (depending upon student access and reliability of the service), for a synchronous communication session. In order to maintain regular contact outside of 'face-to-face' sessions, students and teachers communicated via email, blogs, online discussions and chats (asynchronous communications) which were hosted on Ning, a social network with invitation-only privacy functionality.

When preparing to facilitate communication sessions with students in their weekly 'face-to-face' sessions, the research team consulted a curriculum delivery checklist, which, like the design checklist, was based upon questions within the CoI Survey Instrument (Arbaugh et al.). This checklist, which has been reported elsewhere (Author 1, Author 1 and Chambers), outlined the sorts of actions that teachers might take when visiting the online environment in order to promote student engagement and collaboration. Of the seventeen actions included in this checklist, two related to cognitive presence, nine to teaching presence, and six to social presence.

At the end of each iteration of the pilot, students' comics were exhibited for project supporters, friends, and family in a 'roped off' area of Second Life known as Skoolaborate, which was made available to all participating students by the DECV, and managed by Assistant Principal Mark Kent, who created a custom-made gallery to house these exhibitions. Exhibiting in this virtual gallery gave participants an authentic outlet for their work as well as a platform to speak about its creation.

### 3. Results

For the research team, the educational outcomes of this pilot exceeded expectations, as they watched the young comic book creators demonstrate high levels of engagement, motivation, peer support, and leadership. The students' diverse socio-economic, demographic, racial, and geographical backgrounds seemed both noteworthy and almost inconsequential as contributors shared ideas, explored open discourse and debate while collaboratively creating comic book narratives, all within the context of being global artists. There was a noticeable absence of participants 'acting out' through unreconstructed classroom youth archetypes such as the 'jock', 'princess', 'bully', and

‘prankster’; instead, new identities were represented by the avatars the students chose to represent them: musical instruments, superheroes, photographic self-portraits (‘selfies’), indigenous fauna and flora, and tribal masks. Within each cohort, members explored their own culture and identity while shaping the culture and identity of an online arts-based community.

In discussions with the research team, students routinely spoke of being able to express themselves more freely than was often permitted in a regular school environment. One of the most significant examples came from the students in New Jersey, who reported having had problems with discipline in their regular schools. In the CGG learning space, they became model students, assisting newer students to feel comfortable with the technology and even going beyond comics to set up their own animation studio whose products they broadcast within the Ning. In both synchronous and asynchronous communications, no more weight was given to the teacher’s opinion than to that of the student-participants, and it was typical for students to ‘butt in’ while a teacher was talking in just the same way they would with a peer.

While adhering generally to the curriculum outlined within Section 2, the teaching methods favoured by proponents of outcome-driven education – those of writing up ‘learning goals’ and sticking to these, or ‘teaching to the test’ - were eschewed in CGG, in favour of a more inclusive, constructivist pedagogy. Students were encouraged explore ideas that they found interesting, puzzling, troubling or inspiring. As a result of this process of inquiry, the students’ finished products varied in theme, from humorous comics; to military and other action comics; to comics exploring issues such as environmental conservation and body image; to comics exploring educational concepts such as the table of elements. The process for creating comics was equally varied, from students who chose to work on their own; to students who worked in groups of two or three within their own classes; to one student who advertised for willing artists on Facebook, a collaboration strategy he developed through his own initiative.

Using the asynchronous communication tools provided by Ning, particularly the discussion board, students were encouraged to share ideas on one another’s art work, particularly during its development phase. With no pressure to complete work for summative assessment, members focused on the *process* of their efforts, exhibiting both supportive and empathic responses to other members. As a result, engagement and creative expression increased, while a culture of acknowledgement and discourse thrived. Students began to view each other as ‘experts’, relying upon each other for vital feedback during the creative process.

Constructive feedback cultivated a safe and supportive space, creating impetus for the exploration of a broad variation of artistic mediums and methods, and the construction of previously unimagined worlds. It was within this context of creative risk-taking and acceptance that 50 of the 160 participants chose to complete a voluntary online survey that sat to one side of the main discussion panel and asked, simply, which of 6 possible options comics were most important for. The options were: ‘Entertainment’, ‘Escape’, ‘Education’, ‘Understanding the World’, ‘Developing creativity’, and ‘Other’. Interestingly, the two highest scores were recorded for ‘Entertainment’ (30%) and ‘Developing creativity’ (22%). There was certainly a plethora of evidence to support the latter in this online meeting space.

While the educational outcomes of Comics Go Global were overwhelmingly positive, there were technical and logistical challenges with mounting a project spanning three continents. The reality of working in both hemispheres was that, while Australian students could work with American students *or* English students, it was



impossible to find a time when all three continents could connect simultaneously. The mode of delivery also had to change to some extent depending upon the number of participants from each school. While distance education students in Victoria and Cairns logged on individually, from home, the students in Sheffield attended the sessions as a group, sitting in their school library posed some interesting challenges for students and teachers. This more traditional classroom set-up sometimes made the class feel less like a conversation between equals, and more like a lecture from teacher to student. It was also clear that, due to these more traditional classroom dynamics, others – such as shyness in front of one’s peers, a trait that was not evident in any other students who participated - were present in Sheffield’s classes.

#### **4. Discussion**

It has been said that desire is what drives the mobility of people and ideas, and brings these multiplicities together (Rizvi). History suggests the energies of desire and imagining cannot be stopped but they can be ridden, as a surfer might ride a wave (Deleuze and Guattari). CGG serves as a platform and mode for teachers and students not to control the environment and serve preconceived agendas, but as a mode and platform through which the self and difference might emerge anew. As has been shown, CGG explores transnationalism as a re-imagining of the concepts of individual identity and community through one’s capacity to transcend boundaries and interconnect with other people, ideas, and spaces.

Rizvi argues that the homogenization which has been created through transnationalism and cultural connection means people are often expected to behave like one another. He points out that one of the challenges then of transnationalism is that it does not so much frame intercultural relations as is framed by them (Rizvi). In an educational context, it seems that CGG can provide a model to counter the loss of self in the process of homogenization, as it is used for the creation of identity rather than the expression of identity (Colebrook 104); put simply, CGG is not about *being*, but *becoming*.

CGG is guided by an inclusive philosophy and practice, and the research team responsible for this pilot is committed to the achievement of access, equity, growth and opportunity for all students. The technologies and communication platforms employed in this pilot project are all free or low-cost so that educators and schools around the world can replicate the processes, tools, and strategies without financial barriers. This commitment is designed to allow difference and enable an individualism for creative shaping of self-expression rather than receptivity for product consumption (Rizvi). Ultimately, this pilot project demonstrates how productive a group of globally interconnected teachers and students can become when they are driven not by a focus on outcomes, but by a desire to teach, learn, and share.

#### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

After 4 years, 6 iterations, based in 3 continents, with 160 ‘graduates’, Comics Go Global stands an example of a successful non-hierarchical project-based model for those individuals and institutions wishing to explore the possibilities of transnationalism and education. However, there are many lessons that have come out of the pilot, which inform the recommendations below:

##### *5.1 Choosing the right ICTs*

Communication technologies were by far the greatest hurdle for teachers and students involved in the project. As the number of sites and participants continue to grow, it will be necessary to implement a robust raft of Web 2.0 programs that will assist in promoting communication and collaboration without requiring participants to have access to expensive hardware or software. While the asynchronous communication tools, such as discussion boards and email worked well, the free-of-charge synchronous communication tools chosen for use during the pilot, such as Skype and Adobe Connect, proved unreliable. Google Hangouts was the most successful free-of-charge platform for video chat so far, and will need to be investigated further, particularly with larger numbers of students.

### *5.2 Adopting pre- and post-test measures*

In order to assess the amount of change in students' knowledge and behaviour due to Comics Go Global, it is important that a standard measure that can be completed by all students before and after they undertake the programme. The research team believes that a suitable measure is the Community of Inquiry survey (Arbaugh et al.; Swan et al.), since the CoI framework underpins both the content development and delivery of CGG.

### *5.3 Recruiting and supporting participants*

The exact number of participants that would be optimal for each cohort is yet to be determined, and may depend upon the reliability of technology, and the number of students who have to share a webcam within each geographical location. As well as enrolling teachers to work with students in different locations, the research team recommends that each group is assigned a 'mentor', (former student-participants), who could liaise between teachers and students while gaining valuable leadership experience. In discussions with the research team, many pilot participants have shown an interest in taking on just such a responsibility, suggesting that previous participation in the project might be a viable method for recruiting appropriate mentors.

Taking into account our experience during this four-year pilot study, and the recommendations that have emerged from it, the research team has begun to plan an expansion of the number of projects it offers to students, each of which will use a modified version of the Comics Go Global pilot model (the 'CGG model') as its basis. Such projects could be entitled *Journalism Goes Global*, *Sustainability Goes Global*, or *Exercise Goes Global*. This model is based upon a seven-week Project-Collaboration cycle buttressed by two weeks of collaborative curriculum development before the cycle and two weeks of data collection, analysis, and iterative improvement after the cycle.

Under this model, each learning cycle would be comprised of: 1) a content area focus; 2) a media project to be completed by transnational youths in individual and collaborative settings; 3) weekly real-time collaborations between participating youths; 4) guidance from experts in the content area/experts in the field; 5) platforms for youths to review and provide feedback for peer work; 6) a sequential curriculum structured around weekly standards-based challenges; 7) a youth-led webcast to showcase the original products; 8) data collection and analysis of student work; and 9) iterative refinement to improve each project implementation.

Through this sustainable and highly transferrable model of project-based transnational collaborations, the research team aims to bolster student engagement and achievement amongst learners from around the world. In order to successfully implement an intervention of this size, the research team aims to recruit three higher

education institutions, as well as three secondary-school-level institutions, to form a network of learners known as the ‘Global Learning Space’ (GLS). Network members and their stakeholders—students, teachers, researchers, parents, school administrators, parents, and community members—will collaborate throughout the project to develop curricula, set schedules, test platforms, deliver instruction, support learners, and disseminate results. This learning and research community should stand as an example of a transnational approach to furthering knowledge about teaching and learning in the twenty-first century.

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