# Contents

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Chapter 1

# ENCOURAGING LITERACY, EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

Serious Comix is a student-centred literacy-building program in which students use technology to create and present their own digital comic books (digital storyboards). Students enhance their reading/writing and visual literacy skills and learn transferrable technology skills while working in an environment created to support dialogue and collaboration.

To create a Serious Comix digital storyboard, students engage in a combination of reading, writing and image creation within a comic-strip style format. Students find the comic book format easy to understand and use. Because comic books are laid out in sequential frames, it is easy for readers to track the progress of a story. The format also allows student authors to easily jump ahead and go back as necessary during the creative process. Because each frame contains both text and a picture, readers can easily grasp and contextualise a story, and writers are not overwhelmed by the amount of text they need to produce. Moreover, the clearly defined framing and sequencing of a comic helps students better understand the critical literary points of a story.

Serious Comix is a fun and engaging project. Students are excited at the thought of creating their own comic books. But students aren't simply assigned to draw a cartoon. Serious Comix invites students to organise their thoughts. Through guided practice, students are shown how to give structure to their ideas and how to commit those ideas to writing and illustrations via the use of graphic organisers.

The comic book creation process has three essential components: the dialogue exchange, the writing process, and the use of technology to construct and present the comic book. These components are combined into teaching and learning activities such as




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discussing and developing story ideas, learning and using graphic organisers, working independently and as part of a team, evaluating the work of peers, using technology as a tool to complete work and presenting the finished product. Class time is designed to allow students to share stories and ideas, improve literacy and technology skills, and interact with each other.

## What Is Serious Comix?

As I developed the Serious Comix project, I encountered some fundamental instructional, technological and environmental concerns. Answering the following questions helped me fuse my knowledge of technology, curriculum mandates and student dispositions into the whole that is Serious Comix.

> ***Digital Storyboards and Literacy.*** What sort of comic will students create? How will this activity meet the literacy development needs of diverse learners? How does the creation of this comic address the integration of literacy and technology?
>
> ***Technology as Instructional Tool.*** What is meant by "technology as an instructional tool"? How should technology be used as an instructional tool?
>
> ***Teaching and Learning Environment.*** How can the teaching environment foster reflective practices and ongoing assessments that are specific to both technology integration and literacy? What are the key characteristics that inform instructional planning in a nontraditional or alternative environment?
>
> ***Technology Standards and Teacher Knowledge.*** What are the technology standards for teaching literacy and technology? How will the technological knowledge and skills of a classroom teacher affect technology integration within the larger literacy curriculum?

## Comics and Literacy

Benjamin Franklin's newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, published one of the earliest comics that included situation, text, and cartoon characters. On 9 May, 1754, the famous 'Join, or Die' cartoon appear ed (see Figure 1.1). It was a call for the original thirteen British colonies in America to unite in the common cause of rebellion against English rule, and it is considered to be the first American political cartoon. That we remember it today is testament to the enduring power of Franklin's creative imagination, technical skill and political vision. It is also a testament to the power of blending images with text – readers in Franklin's time readily understood the message and intent of this cartoon, just as readily as we do today.

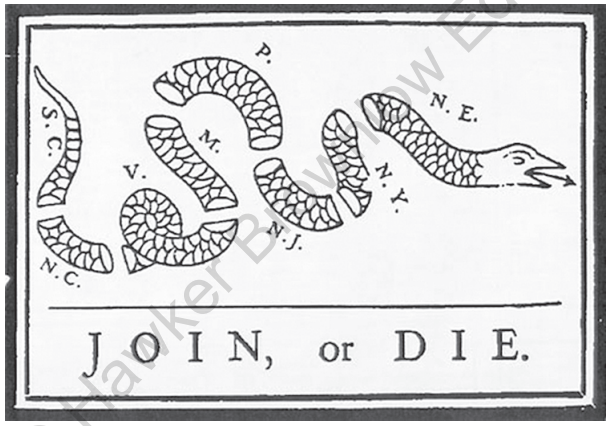


**Figure 1.1** *Comics blend image with text to create meaning*



This connection between words and illustrations – whether encountered in cartoons, comic strips, comic books or graphic novels – can transform the way we read. First thought of as just an amusement or distraction, comics have found a legitimate place in the classroom. There are two main advantages of using digital storyboards for improving literacy. The first is that research has shown that the use of comic books as instructional texts has a positive impact on improving students' literacy skills (Starr, 2004). Creating and


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interpreting images also enables students to access higher-order creative and critical thinking skills (Bloom, 1984). The second is that using images to facilitate reading and writing is a form of differentiated instruction that expands student access to the classroom English curriculum. Viewing a storyboard, students are able to analyse images in order to sequence, decode, comprehend and infer the storyline (Piro, 2002). In this way, comics can provide entry points, learning tasks and outcomes that can meet diverse student literacy needs.

Although Serious Comix students may not create digital storyboards with a relevance that will span generations, their creations nonetheless will, in some way, share a common visual language, organisational sensibility and presentation style with Franklin's classic work. More importantly, a student's digital storyboard will demonstrate individual interests and purpose and will provide tangible evidence of individual growth in terms of literacy and effective technology use.



## Promoting Multiple Literacies

Literacy is more than the ability to read and write. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines *literacy* as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. The development of literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." The word *literacy* has been attached to maths, science, social studies, media and now technology.

Schools everywhere are tasked with increasing traditional literacy levels. For example, as of 2003, New York City's public schools were mandated to teach a 'Balanced Literacy' curriculum. According to the curriculum, students must be immersed and exposed to a

literature-rich environment for all subjects (e.g. classroom libraries, wall words, posters, bulletin boards and other like items). The New York City Department of Education website (http://schools.nyc.gov) discusses how Balanced Literacy is implemented in each class as it "stresses the essential dimensions of reading through explicit teaching of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency and expressiveness, vocabulary, and comprehension. Daily read-aloud, independent reading time, reading workshop, writing workshop, and systematic word study instruction are key features of the approach."

The Serious Comix project promotes traditional literacy, visual literacy and technology literacy. Students learn to improve their reading and writing skills by connecting created images and text. The students' ability to create a storyline – reading and writing, analysing and comprehending words – is a strong and relevant foundation from which to teach literacy strategies. Technology literacy is accomplished through the use of instructional tools such as word processors and presentation applications.



## Visual Literacy

According to Arizpe (2001), creating and interpreting images enables students to develop their visual literacy skills. Visual literacy skills allow students to analyse their images, express their thoughts verbally and then associate text in the form of a storyline. In Serious Comix, graphic organisers are used as an instructional tool to bridge traditional and visual literacy.

Graphic organisers (visual learning aids that can represent knowledge, concepts or ideas in an organised manner) are used to facilitate the introduction of visual storytelling issues that may be new to students while allowing teachers to review the primary elements of a story (main idea, beginning, middle and conclusion) that students may already have encountered elsewhere. Teachers can use graphic organisers to integrate visual storytelling language basics into their lessons.


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