

Comics as Social Innovation

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Abstract

Rapid social change requires education that supports young people to understand complex societal challenges and consider how they might contribute to meaningful solutions. Introducing social innovation in schools advances this aim by helping learners explore how new ideas and practices can improve community well-being. Yet the conceptual and emotional depth of social innovation can be difficult to access through conventional materials. This paper examines how comics can serve as an effective pedagogical resource for exploring social innovation and argues that comics themselves can be understood as a form of social innovation.

Comics integrate visual, spatial, and written modes, enabling learners to interpret information through multiple pathways. Their multimodal structure supports observation, sequencing, and meaning-making, providing an accessible and engaging format for examining real-world issues. Because comics communicate complex and emotive ideas through imagery as well as text, they accommodate diverse literacy levels, cultural contexts, and lived experiences. This inclusivity creates opportunities for students to consider multiple perspectives, unpack societal challenges, and imagine possibilities for positive change.

The paper further contends that comics function as social innovation by expanding participation and fostering shared understanding. By representing cultural norms, social concerns, and personal experiences in resonant ways, comics help readers recognise common vulnerabilities and reflect on the contexts in which innovation is needed.

Situated within the EU SIDE (European Social Innovation and Democratic Education) Teacher Academy, the paper uses social innovation competencies as a framework to analyse how comics empower learners to understand, participate in, and influence social change. It demonstrates that comics offer a valuable and socially innovative medium for supporting engagement with social innovation in design and technology education.

1 INTRODUCTION

In a period of significant societal change, developing critical awareness of inequality, climate change, digitalisation, health disparities, migration and social exclusion is essential, as these conditions shape the need for social innovation (OECD, 2018). Social innovation has emerged in response to these interconnected challenges and encourages creative, participatory and systemic approaches to advancing social well-being (Ayob, 2016). For educators, this involves supporting learners to analyse complex systems, imagine alternatives and act collaboratively and reflexively in their own contexts (OECD, 2018; Moravec & Martínez Bravo, 2023).

This paper presents a twofold argument for technology education. It proposes that comics offer an effective way to engage with social innovation because their multimodal form helps students think critically, understand systems and develop design-oriented skills within project-based learning (Aman & Wallner, 2022; Jewitt, 2008). It also argues that comics themselves operate as social innovation by widening participation and reshaping how knowledge is shared. Their capacity to communicate complex and affective information supports learners in interpreting, reflecting and acting within more inclusive learning communities (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Matuk et al., 2021).

Positioning comics within social innovation scholarship is conceptually coherent. Social innovation involves new or reconfigured social practices that respond to needs and create public value by altering relationships and capabilities (Mulgan, 2006; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). Comics align with this understanding by challenging conventional pedagogical and literacy norms, legitimising multimodal meaning-making and expanding participation through accessible and diverse literacies (Aman & Wallner, 2022; Matuk et al., 2021). They also enable learners to identify needs, model systems and prototype more just and sustainable alternatives (FES Asia, 2018; Matuk et al., 2021).

This paper is situated within the EU SIDE European Social Innovation and Democratic Education Teacher Academy (Universidad de Burgos, 2026; HAMK, 2025–2028). The initiative provides advanced programmes and open-access MOOCs implemented in real school contexts through design-based research (EU SIDE Consortium, n.d.; Design Based Research Collective, 2003).

Within this context, the paper examines how the accessibility of comics enables deeper engagement with social issues. Meaningful engagement is a prerequisite for social innovation, as individuals must first be able to understand the social problem before questioning ideas, developing alternatives or building the agency needed to influence social change. This foundation informs the following section, which considers how comics function as forms of social innovation and how their accessible multimodal form supports understanding and participation in social change.

2 DEFINING SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovation is widely understood as the development and diffusion of new or reconfigured social practices that address societal needs while creating public value and transforming social relations (Mulgan, 2006; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). Although definitions vary, the literature consistently highlights novelty as the reorganisation of existing practices, effectiveness in responding to unmet or complex needs, and value creation through participation, capability building and shifts in power dynamics (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2010; Manzini, 2015). Within EU policy, social innovation is framed as a means to strengthen inclusion, democratic participation and systemic transformation across sectors (OECD, 2018). However, opportunities to participate remain uneven. Barriers linked to literacy, digital inequalities, confidence and access continue to restrict engagement, and disparities in connectivity and digital skills closely reflect income, education, age and geography (Gomes & Dias, 2025; Eurofound, 2025). Research on participatory and democratic initiatives also identifies that exclusion persists when capability gaps and underlying power imbalances remain unaddressed (Bussu et al., 2022; García Espín, 2024). EU strategies therefore emphasise accessible information, digital competence and supportive environments as essential conditions for widening participation (European Commission, 2026; European Parliament Think Tank, 2025). Community-led innovation similarly requires intentional scaffolding to strengthen agency and reduce barriers (Kiresiewa & Gerdes, 2025). Within this uneven landscape, comics are proposed as a medium that can widen participation and amplify voices that are often unheard.

While understandings of social innovation continue to evolve, a central theme emphasises cross-sector collaboration and the restructuring of power relations to expand human capabilities. Mulgan (2020) situates social innovation within processes of tension, mobilisation and iterative development, where diverse actors generate and refine alternatives. In education, this perspective translates into cultivating competencies such as agency, equity, empathy, collaborative problem solving, systems thinking and creativity. These capacities help learners frame problems, test ideas and adapt solutions within real constraints. Social innovation can therefore be understood as the creation and implementation of novel approaches that address social problems more effectively, justly or sustainably than existing practices, with societal rather than individual benefit as the core measure of impact (Mulgan, 2006; OECD, 2025).

Within this educational framing, comics contribute by disrupting conventional pedagogical hierarchies and legitimising visual modes of meaning making. Multimodal theories position image, layout, gesture and writing as coequal resources for learning (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2008). The integration of visual and verbal elements makes complex or emotionally challenging topics more accessible and supports comprehension for learners who may struggle with dense or abstract text. Through sequence, imagery and perspective, comics situate social issues in concrete and relatable ways (Belda Medina, 2024).

2.1 *Engaging with the Complexity of Social Innovation*

Understanding comics as multimodal texts clarifies how images are produced and meanings designed. Eisner's (1985) concept of sequential art illustrates how panels, framing and pacing work with text to model processes such as learning and decision making. Comics illustrate the multimodal literacy described by Jewitt and Kress (2003), where learners draw on image, writing, layout, gesture and gaze to construct meaning, and where students design texts rather than simply decode them (Jewitt, 2008). The New London Group's (1996) multiliteracies framework extends this by advocating pedagogies that value diverse modes and cultural practices, enabling learners to design social futures in ways that align with social innovation.

Critical multimodal literacy research demonstrates that students use multimodal resources to re-story experience, retelling and reshaping texts and realities from their own perspectives while critiquing socio-political conditions within equity-oriented frameworks (Cappello et al., 2019). Reader response studies similarly demonstrate that understanding comic conventions deepens meaning making, especially when learners also create their own texts (Rogers, 2014; Bender, 2019). Beyond classroom practice, cultural initiatives highlight the civic role of comics in public-facing social innovation. Collectively, these strands indicate that comics represent social innovation processes while also serving as tools for developing the competencies required for socially innovative practice.

2.1.1 *Comics as Social Innovation*

Comics can be understood both as a medium that responds to social needs and as a practical form of social innovation within education. Their multimodal form supports learning across subjects and lived experiences by combining image, text, sequence and spatial design in ways that expand opportunities for meaning making (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2008). Research suggests that comics communicate complex ideas effectively while sustaining engagement in higher and further education (van der Sluis, 2025). They broaden participation by offering accessible entry points for neurodiverse, multilingual and academically marginalised learners and can be adapted across linguistic and literacy levels (Matuk et al., 2021; van der Sluis, 2025). Their low-threshold production also enables learners to articulate social, cultural and political realities that are often excluded from traditional pedagogies, allowing marginalised voices to be heard (Watkins, 2023).

In learning about social innovation, comics help students visualise social problems and recognise themselves as potential agents of change (Sousanis, 2015). Focalisation, or the filtering of narrative through a character's perceptions and emotions, becomes visually explicit. Internal focalisation appears through thought balloons or visual metaphors, while external focalisation is conveyed through speech, gesture and action (Badman, 2010; Horstkotte & Pedri, 2022). This dual access to internal and external viewpoints allows learners to engage with experiences and perspectives that are often invisible or unspoken, deepening their understanding of social issues. It also supports identification with characters whose situations echo shared or marginalised realities. As Kirtley (2020) notes, this accessibility enables readers to see themselves reflected in

the narrative, making visible emotions, perspectives and social dynamics that might otherwise remain unarticulated.

Because comics do not require advanced drawing skills or specialised materials, they lower barriers to participation and support communication, reflection and agency. Through this combination of expression, interpretation and accessibility, comics contribute directly to the development of critical reflection and the capabilities required for social innovation. The image below illustrates how comics provide a low-threshold medium where expression matters more than artistry and where all that is needed is an idea, a pencil and paper.

Figure 1

Comics as a way to communicate and develop ideas with low level requirements. Credit: Kelly (2026a)



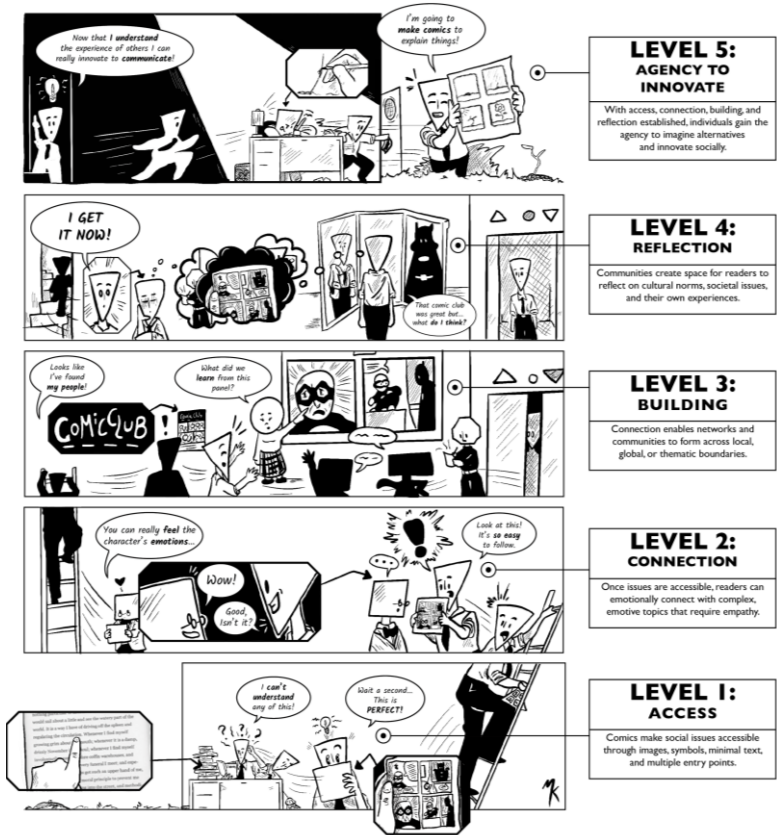
Comics offer a powerful way to understand social problems visually while fostering empathy and perspective taking. Because meaning emerges through the interplay of image, text, and reader interpretation, this expands participation, as comics do not require advanced artistic skill; simple drawings and minimal text can express complex experiences, enabling a wider range of learners to contribute meaningfully (Smyth, 2022). These shifts in agency and participation reflect social innovation practices that reorganise relationships, support new forms of expression, and challenge traditional power structures. In this sense, creating comics functions as social innovation by

helping learners articulate problems, imagine alternatives, and rehearse change-making identities within an accessible, inclusive medium (Kirtley, 2020; Lewis, 2023).

Comics function as social innovation by providing accessible entry points to complex social issues through images, symbols, minimal text, and multiple pathways for engagement, as illustrated in the comic below. This accessibility enables emotional connection, network-building, and community reflection, creating the space for learners to imagine alternatives, develop agency, and actively participate in social innovation

Figure 2

Comics as Social Innovation. Credit: Kelly (2026b)



Comics function not only as artistic media but as social technologies embedded in networks of practice (Latour, 2005). Social innovation depends on competencies such as systems thinking, empathy, creativity and collaboration (Mulgan, 2006; 2010). Comics reflect lived experience and help cultivate these capacities.

2.2 *Exploration of Social Innovation*

The purpose of this paper is to examine comics as a form of social innovation and to explore how their multimodal qualities support engagement with complex social issues. Comics integrate visual and narrative elements that lower literacy barriers, offer varied entry points for understanding, and sustain engagement among diverse learners, including those who struggle with text dominant materials (Belda Medina, 2024; Axelrod & Kahn, 2024). This aligns with multimodal scholarship that treats image, layout, gesture and writing as coequal resources for learning and meaning making (Jewitt, 2008; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). By reflecting readers' communities and experiences, comics foster recognition, belonging and participation (Belda Medina, 2024). They can therefore operate as accessible learning resources and as social innovations that widen participation, support self-development and strengthen agency and voice.

2.3 *Evaluating Comics as Social Innovation*

To demonstrate how comics function as a form of social innovation, it is helpful to consider the social, cultural and temporal conditions that shape both practices. This perspective demonstrates how each influences participation, meaning making and learning.

The table below outlines how comics and social innovation operate as mediated practices shaped by social, cultural and historical forces. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, it illustrates how both are co constructed through interactions between people, contexts and moments in time. This comparison highlights their shared ability to support collaborative engagement, situate learning within cultural experience and respond to changing conditions. Seen in this way, comics and social innovation function as culturally grounded practices that help learners interpret complex issues, explore multiple perspectives and engage in collective meaning making, reinforcing their value for reflection and imaginative problem solving.

Table 1*Social, Cultural, and Temporal connectivity between Comics and Social Innovation*

| | Social | Cultural | Temporal |
|-------------------|--|--|--|
| Comics | Visually depict social interactions; highlight marginalised voices; foster empathy and perspective understanding. (McCloud, 1993). | Reflect, question, and reimagine cultural values through symbols, imagery, and narrative choices. (Tanwar & Arora, 2026). | Evolve over time in style, themes, and representation; support iterative interpretation and learning. (Hansen et al., 2016). |
| Social Innovation | Address inequalities; promote collaboration; support community-led change. (Mulgan et al., 2007). | Challenge existing norms; co-create new cultural practices and shared meanings. (Westley, 2013). | Adapt to emerging social needs through cycles of experimentation, iteration, and reflection. (Murray et al., 2010). |
| Connected Enabler | Both act as socially mediated tools that foster empathy, participation, and collective action. | Both function as cultural tools that shape and are shaped by context, enabling shared meaning-making. Voice is given to those who are not generally heard. | Both engage with change over time, enabling iterative learning, empowerment, and agency. |

Comics can be understood as a form of social innovation and resource for engaging with social innovation. It. As social innovation, comics visualise complex social, cultural, and temporal dynamics, amplify marginalised experiences, and help people reimagine norms and possibilities. Their narrative qualities make social issues more accessible and support new ways of seeing change. Comics have the potential for earners to connect personal experiences to broader societal structures and engage with empathy, systems thinking, and creative problem solving (Aman & Wallner, 2022). Overall, both comics and social innovation mediate understanding, reshape cultural meaning, and evolve over time, making comics a valuable companion to social-innovation learning.

3 EXAMPLIFY COMICS AS SOCIAL INNOVATION

Comics both embody and enable social innovation. They embody innovation as cultural forms that challenge hierarchies of knowledge production, and they enable innovation by providing creative and participatory media through which people identify needs, imagine alternatives, critique systems and communicate proposals. This dual role positions comics as social innovation, and as social innovations in themselves, widening participation, empowering learners and democratising knowledge.

To ground this argument, the paper examines *An Equal Future – Inspiring Social Innovations* as a case that functions both as communication about social innovation and as a social innovation in its own right. Produced collaboratively by the Finnish Institute in the UK and Ireland and the Lakes International Comic Arts Festival, the anthology uses comics to make complex social innovations accessible across three languages (Finnish Institute, 2021; Lakes International 2021). Conceptually, the paper synthesises social innovation theory and multimodality research to explain how comics operate pedagogically and innovatively (Aman & Wallner, 2022). Empirically, it reads *An Equal Future* as evidence of communicative efficacy and innovative production. The paper clarifies the theoretical frame, analyses the affordances of comics for systems-oriented learning, examines the case study and outlines implications for design and technology education.

The anthology's co creative, transnational production model exemplifies socially innovative practice by distributing expertise and supporting participatory authorship (Lakes International Comic Arts Festival, 2021). Each artist's contribution offers situated social commentary that reimagines relationships between policy, society and everyday life. By marking an institutional milestone with a forward-looking comic. Demonstrating how cultural organisations can adopt innovative communicative practices that broaden participation and support cross border knowledge exchange.

Within this framework, comics emerge as a valuable medium for design and technology education. They enable learners to integrate systems thinking, critique socio technical complexity and explore inclusive and imaginative design futures. In this context, the chapter *Universal Basic Income* by Darryl Cunningham examines the concept and its relevance to social innovation (Cunningham, 2021). The excerpt illustrates how poverty traps develop when returning to work leads to loss of essential benefits, along with the effects on wellbeing. By visualising these dynamics, the comic supports understanding, empathy and critical reflection, showing how limited access to basic income and negative stereotypes constrain agency (Cunningham, 2021).

Figure 3

Understanding barriers to social innovation, by D. Cunningham (2021), in An equal future: Inspiring social innovations from Finland, the UK and Ireland. Finnish Institute in the UK and Ireland. Reproduced with permission.



Through this comic, we see how visual storytelling can build social understanding by humanising the realities behind policy debates. This insight sets the stage for the concluding remarks, where the wider implications of comics as tools for social innovation are considered.

4 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper demonstrates that comics function as a form of social innovation. By supporting recognition and identification, they allow readers to see their own experiences and communities represented. This movement from comprehension to participation helps foster voice and agency.

The paper also considers how comics operate within social innovation practice. In many European contexts, uneven digital access, variations in skills, and socioeconomic or geographic inequalities continue to limit who can participate in innovation processes (Gomes and Dias, 2025). Comics offer a practical response to these constraints because they reduce literacy demands, support meaning making, and provide an accessible medium for reflection and dialogue. These conditions are widely acknowledged as essential for inclusive participation (Belda Medina, 2024; Jewitt, 2008). Research on participatory and democratic engagement warns that participation can become tokenistic when differences in power and capability are overlooked. Comics help address this by broadening who can understand, contribute, and be heard.

Understanding comics as social innovation is therefore analytically valuable. It positions the medium as a change practice that expands access, enhances recognition, and strengthens agency beyond formal policy mechanisms (Belda Medina, 2024; Jewitt and Kress, 2003). The design-based research that follows will test these claims across EU SIDE pilot sites (EU SIDE Consortium, n.d.), assessing how comics function both as socially innovative artefacts and as enabling tools within broader innovation processes.

If social innovation asks us to rethink how change happens, comics remind us that change also begins with how we tell our stories—and who gets to tell them.

5 DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies were used solely to enhance clarity and structure of the written text. All scholarly contributions, theoretical perspectives, and analyses were produced by the authors.

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