

Leuven pupils begin international comic adventure

by *Andy Furniere,*

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SUMMARY

The EU-funded initiative Strip to Identity sees pupils in Leuven collaborating with contemporaries around Europe to produce comics that explain fundamental characteristics of their regions

Culture through comics

Through the medium of comics, which happens to be a Flemish speciality, the secondary school at the Miniemen Institute in Leuven is encouraging its students to look beyond the borders of Flanders. With the Strip to Identity project, funded by the European Commission, students and teachers can also learn about cultures and teaching methods abroad.



At the beginning of this month, pupils from secondary schools in Turkey, Germany, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Norway and Ireland came together at Limburg's Alden Biesen complex for the kick-off event of [Strip to Identity](#) (pictured). Thirteen students from international project management at the Miniemen Institute, which is co-ordinating the initiative, welcomed their fellow students for three days of seminars and workshops. The Flemish students are all in their fifth year of secondary school.

“All the students had different tasks, from making badges to introducing the speakers,” explains teacher Diederik Roelandts, who is co-ordinating the project with colleague Dirk Staf. The kick-off is the first of several gatherings in the context of the project, which has received funding for the next three years.

Throughout the school year, pupils and teachers can collaborate through an innovative digital platform provided for free by ICT multinational Microsoft. “This platform principally serves the collaboration between the eight main partner schools, but we also grant access to other interested schools, like one in Taiwan, which can learn from and contribute to the project,” says Staf.

Regional identity

During Strip to Identity, every school will create comics on the basis of a classic story from their culture. The comics should not only be fun to read but describe fundamental characteristics of the region's identity. The Miniemen Institute opted for the 1920 novel *De Witte* (*Whitey*) by Ernest Claes.

“*It's essential that they learn about different identities, to broaden their worldview*”

- DIRK STAF

De Witte is a novel about an inventive boy who grows up in a poor family but finds refuge in pranks and literature. “It's funny and enjoyable to read, but it also explains certain social, religious and political aspects of Flemish culture,” explains Roelandts.

The pupils will use photos shot in the region of Flemish Brabant around Scherpenheuvel and Averbode, where the story takes place, as inspiration for the comic's setting. The characters will be designed through the specialised software programme Pixton. In the first year of the project, the pupils will create the comic in their native language, and an English translation will be developed in the second year.

The pupils will also develop pedagogical files in their mother tongue, with informative background and analysis of the story, so that the comics and

files can be used as learning materials in primary schools. In the third and final year of Strip to Identity, the project should be continued with new ideas and approaches.

In May of 2017, the international team will present the collection of eight comic books from the partner schools, which will be published in a printed and digital version for educational purposes only.

Ready to read?

The Miniemen Institute has concrete experience with this kind of project. In the last academic year, secondary school students worked with contemporaries at a partner school in Poland to create a comic on the basis of fairy tales by the Irish writer Oscar Wilde.

This [Ready to Read Me](#) project was also supported by the European Commission. “For this project, we first carried out a survey, which showed that if youngsters want to read anything other than magazines, they are mostly attracted to comics,” explains Roelandts.

“*It's more motivating to be active yourself than to have to sit and listen*”

- HALIME CELEBI

One of the main purposes of the two projects is to develop literacy among young people, one of the goals of Europe 2020 – the European Union's strategic growth strategy. “Practising their reading skills will help students in the long term to more easily process large units of information,” says Staf. “But this informal way of working also helps them develop their digital, English-language and social skills more efficiently than through more traditional teaching methods.”

Staf explains that students learn to work in a team, to finish a project and to interact with people from different cultures. “It's essential that they learn about multiple identities, to broaden their worldview and to develop tolerance,” he says.

For Halime Celebi, 16, one of the participating students at Leuven, one of the main advantages is that she can express her creativity. “It’s more motivating to be active yourself than to have to sit and listen,” she explains.

Fellow student Cyrus Vanderschoot, 17, says he was surprised by the ease with which the students mingled, and he looks forward to learning more about the foreign cultures through their stories. Both also stress that they keep in touch with their fellow students abroad.

As Strip to Identity has also received funding for a mobility programme, students can even go on an Erasmus exchange at one of the partner schools and stay at a host family in the country. Teachers and directors will also pay extensive visits to other participating schools to gain inspiration for innovative teaching methods.