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Fostering preservice teachers' sense of historical agency through the use of nonfiction graphic novels



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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a case study that explored the potential of nonfiction graphic novels to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of agency in a social studies methods course. White pre-service teachers were asked to read one graphic novel and then add frames, re-narrate frames, and reflect on their decisions. The positionalities of researchers, who are White males, and participants were part of our analysis. The researchers found that pre-service teachers made revisions to the graphic novels to change the historical actors' decisions: within the constraints of the historical situation's circumstances; to better fit their own ethical framework; and to critique the author's interpretation of the historical event and the amount of agency assigned to certain historical actors. We also reported findings related to shifts in understanding related to positionality. The pre-service teachers' revisions demonstrated their understanding of historical actors' ability to make choices; however, for most pre-service teachers those decisions were limited by, and insignificant in comparison to, the constraints of societal structures. Most pre-service teachers viewed these structures as operating outside of the realm of ethics that they used to articulate and identify agency, and thus, these structures were not responsive to changes in individual or collective agency. Implications are provided for social studies teacher educators.

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Introduction

For future social studies educators, it is vitally important to understand the concept of agency, especially historical agency. Historical agency represents fundamental questions regarding history – who did what, and why – and as Barton (2011) described, it is “the stock-in-trade of history – identifying main characters, describing their actions, and trying to explain why events played out as they did” (p. 2). Yet, the concept of historical agency is anything but basic because in trying to teach and learn about history, we need to understand the interactions between human agency and the structural contexts in which individuals and groups have acted. Each semester we have examined this understanding of historical agency with pre-service secondary social studies teachers, who come to our course and have little or no familiarity with the concept of historical agency. Thus, familiarizing pre-service teachers with the concept of historical agency has provided a repeated challenge each semester. This challenge has led us to explore more creative and engaging ways for pre-service teachers to learn about the concept of historical agency. Recently, we used nonfiction graphic novels as a method to encourage such

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creative engagement. This article focuses on a case study of pre-service teachers who engaged with graphic novels as a way to understand historical agency.

Graphic novels provide a relatively new medium for readers to engage with history. Early graphic novels, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986), demonstrated that graphic novels could meaningfully depict the complex ways that economic, political, and societal structures have impacted individuals throughout history (Cromer & Clark, 2007). In comparison to traditional historical narratives, graphic novels use detailed imagery and shift the narrative mode of the historical account from third person to first person, which can emphasize the decisions of historical actors more than traditional narratives (Cromer & Clark, 2007). It is this fundamental difference between traditional historical narratives and the narratives comprised in most graphic novels that offers potentially more effective methods in teaching about historical agency. Since the publication of *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986), many more graphic novels have been published that depict a wide variety of historical events, historical individuals, and societal issues that are relevant to the history and social studies curriculum. Like *Maus*, these graphic novels have increasingly made “the graphic novel a site where ‘history’ itself, or representations of history, are put into play: interrogated, challenged, and even undermined” (Frey & Noys, 2002, p. 258).

The format of many graphic novels naturally highlights the positionality of historical actors. Frame-by-frame, graphic novels depict the societal structures in which the historical actors are embedded and the decisions they make in those circumstances. We understand positionality as an individual's location in socially constructed hierarchies such as class, gender, and race. Thus, we value the depiction of positionality in graphic novels because we want students to understand these societal structures as cultural formations that are created by agents and that individuals are positioned within networks of power relations that constrain actions. These constraints, however, are not absolute. Individuals have acted, and currently act, as agents that influence structures to create more just communities. We used graphic novels in our methodology because of their perceived potential to help pre-service teachers understand agency in this complex way.

The positionality of researchers and participants has become an increasingly important consideration in qualitative research (e.g. Madison, 2005). Our positionality as authors and the positionalities of our participants highlight the importance of both our interactions with the research process and the interactions of participants with the graphic novels. [First Author] is a White, straight, male, assistant professor, and U.S. Citizen. [Second Author] is a White, gay, male, associate professor, and U.S. Citizen. All of the participants in our study are White. Four participants are female, and two participants are male. It is within this milieu of positionalities that we examine the ways that we, researchers, and the pre-service teacher participants, interpret graphic novels and our research.

In this article, we discuss the potential of nonfiction graphic novels to develop pre-service teachers' understanding of historical agency in an undergraduate social studies methods course. The pre-service teachers were asked to read a graphic novel of their choice and then creatively and critically engage with it. Pre-service teachers were asked to *add to* and *re-narrate* frames of their chosen graphic novel, carefully considering: (1) The characters/actors perspectives; (2) The capabilities and constraints of the characters/actors; and (3) The historical/social context of the event or situation. Based upon the students' engagement with nonfiction graphic novels, our research questions simply asked:

- What aspects of agency/historical agency did the students' identify through their engagement with graphic novels?
- How did the students' understand the relationship between agency and societal structures/constraints in their revisions?

The findings in this article will discuss how pre-service teachers identified agency and demonstrated their understanding of the interactions between agency and structure, as depicted in their additions and re-narrations of the graphic novels. Our findings are followed by a discussion of the findings, and then implications for teaching about historical agency in a social studies methods course.

Defining graphic novels

Due to their relatively new role as historical texts, graphic novels need to be more clearly defined. Weiner (2004), author of *The 101 Best Graphic Novels*, defined the graphic novel as “A cousin of comic strips, a graphic novel is a story told in comic book format with a beginning, middle, and end. Graphic novels also include bound books conveying nonfiction information in comic book form” (p. 5). Stephen Tabachnick offered a similar definition of the genre in his introduction to *Teaching the Graphic Novel*. He also addressed the confusion that comes from labeling these graphic works as “novels,” despite the nonfiction content of some graphic novels. Trabachnick (2009) wrote:

The graphic novel is an extended comic book that treats nonfictional as well as fictional plots and themes with the depth and subtlety that we have come to expect of traditional novels and extended nonfictional texts. The term *graphic novel* seems to have stuck despite the fact that graphic novels are often compelling nonfictional works, such as biographies, autobiographies, histories, reportage, and travelogues. (2009, p. 2).

This is an important distinction because all of the graphic novels read by the pre-service teachers in our study were nonfiction, and they all offered new ways for students to engage with history through the interplay of images and text.

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