Teaching Historical Agency: Explicitly Connecting Past and Present with Graphic Novels

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The use of six non-fiction graphic novels to teach historical agency in a social studies methods course was examined in a critical action research study. Pre-service social studies teachers were asked to read one graphic novel and to discuss it with classmates, first in literature circles, then as a whole class. Data revealed graphic novels engaged pre-service teachers in thinking about historical agency, and helped them make connections between historical agency and their own agency. There were three overlapping ways pre-service teachers connected to historical agency in all six graphic novels: upbringing and personal experience, unpredictability of historical situations, and injustice. The findings highlight the value of graphic novels for teaching about historical agency in social studies courses because of their focus on historical agents’ positionality.

Keywords: historical agency, graphic novels, agency, historical thinking skills, social studies methods, pre-service teachers

Introduction

Historical agency, a necessary tool for students to inform and understand their own actions in the present (Barton, 2012; Peck, Poyntz, & Seixas, 2011; Seixas, 1993), as well understand the past and present relationships between structural forces and individuals’ actions, (Clark, 2013b; Clark & Camicia, 2014; Damico, Baildon, & Greenstone, 2010), is at the heart of history education. It is the tool that provides connections between the historical agents’ choices and decisions in the past, and their relevance for students’ choices and decisions in the present. While many history educators may intend to connect the past and present in this way, they often fail because they do not utilize historical agency explicitly as a tool, and instead assume the connection between past and present is implicit in their instruction.

To employ historical agency as a tool with their students, history educators must fully understand historical agency as a concept (Clark & Camicia, 2014). They must further appreciate how historical agency is avoided or misconstrued in the traditional history curriculum (Barton, 2012; Damico et al., 2010; Damico, Baildon, & Lowenstein, 2008), and how historical agency can be used to engage students’ in thinking about the past (Peck et al., 2011). As a history teacher educator, I have emphasized the concept of agency, and specifically the concept of historical agency, in my secondary social studies methods courses. Each semester, however, it proves to be one of the most difficult aspects of historical thinking for pre-service teachers as they struggle to understand this concept beyond: Who did what, and Why? In thinking about the literature that describes the limitations of traditional historical resources for thinking about historical agency (Barton, 2012; Damico et al., 2010; Damico et al., 2008), I decided to use graphic novels to teach about historical agency in a different manner.

The historical accounts in graphic novels provide a relatively new form of narrative to engage students with historical content. There are a variety of nonfiction graphic novels that
meaningfully depict the complex ways that economic, political, and societal forces have influenced individuals’ choices throughout history (Cromer & Clark, 2007). When compared to traditional historical narratives, graphic novels used detailed imagery and often shifted the narrative mode of the historical account from third person to first person (Cromer & Clark, 2007). This shift emphasizes the choices and decisions of historical agents more than traditional narratives. It was this fundamental difference between traditional historical narratives and the narratives comprised in most graphic novels that offered potentially more effective methods of developing students’ understanding of historical agency.

Recognizing the importance of historical agency for connecting historical agents’ actions in the past to students’ actions in the present (Barton, 2012; Seixas, 1993), this study focused on the ways in which pre-service teachers made these connections through reading graphic novels. There were two interrelated research questions:

1) After reading graphic novels, how do pre-service teachers understand historical agency as a tool for thinking about the past?
2) After reading graphic novels, what connections, if any, did pre-service teachers make between historical agency, their own agency, or their potential students’ agency?

**Graphic Novels and Historical Agency**

Graphic novels represent a fairly new resource for exploring historical content. Graphic novels are related to the classic comic strip, but differ in that the narrative has a beginning, middle, and end (Weiner, 2004). In the case of this article, all of the graphic novels read by the pre-service teachers were non-fictional works, yet the label of novel confuses many people leading to the conclusion that the genre is strictly fictional. This inaccurate preconception was discussed in Stephen Tabachnick’s (2009) *Teaching the Graphic Novel*:

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 (p. 2).

The term graphic novel served also to distinguish the genre from its comic book roots (Cromer & Clark, 2007; Frey & Noys, 2002) which has been important, to establish them as legitimate sources of cultural analysis.

Since Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), graphic novels have slowly gained legitimacy it the eyes of historians, historiographers, and history educators. The journals *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* and *The History Teacher* have published special issues focused on legitimizing the use of graphic novels in the field of history. At the university level, graphic novels are frequently used to teach courses in several disciplines. At Indiana University, for example, undergraduate history courses (e.g. Hist-B 303, Fall 2010 semester) focused on teaching the concept of war through the use of graphic novels for over 10 years.

At the Kindergarten-12 level, two articles in *Theory and Research in Social Education* (Cromer & Clark, 2007; Werner, 2002) established the theoretical basis for using graphic novels as meaningful historical sources. These articles demonstrated the interpretation and contextualization skills needed by readers to engage with a visual text. There are also several recent articles that have empirically demonstrated graphic novels’ value for teaching historical thinking and critical literacy skills (Bosma, Rule, & Krueger, 2013; Clark, 2013b; Clark &
Camicia, 2014; Matthews, 2011, 2014). These articles demonstrate the value of graphic novels as more than another historical source, as they offer readers a medium to engage with historical content, while developing skills that historians regularly utilize.

Even though graphic novels have been found to be an engaging medium that can develop skills valuable to historians and historiographers, some historians would still discount the content of graphic novels due to their narrative form. As Keith Barton (1996) noted, “any single story invariably involves selection, simplification, and distortion…Much of the business of history, in fact, is argumentation over whose selective interpretation is best” (p. 403). As reliable historical resources, most nonfiction historical graphic novels utilize primary and secondary sources in creating narratives that bring individual historical actors’ voices to the forefront. The narrative form of graphic novels brings to life the actions of historical agents in ways that are more accessible to students’ schemas associated with human behavior (Barton & Levstik, 2005; Meltzer, 1994), especially when compared to more traditional and informational historical texts. In this way, graphic novels offer an interpretation for readers to engage as they make sense of historical agents actions, and the reasons that sparked those actions (Lee & Ashby, 2001), by utilizing traditional historical sources in unique narrative forms.

The graphic novels read by pre-service teachers in this article, used a blend of primary and secondary sources in creating their historical narrative. In the work Gettysburg (Butzer, 2008) the author develops the novel based upon the journal of Eliza Farnham, who was a nurse during the war. The five other graphic novels discussed in this article are based on primary accounts of the historical events or individuals lives and include: A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge (Neufield, 2009), which is about five individuals’ experiences during Hurricane Katrina; Anne Frank (Jacobson & Colon, 2010), which is about a family’s experience during the Holocaust, Che: A Graphic Biography (Jacobson & Colon, 2009), which discusses the life of the Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara; Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography (Helfer & DeBurke, 2006), which graphically represents the biography of the civil rights leader Malcolm X; and Persepolis (Satrapi, 2004), which focuses on one girl’s experience growing-up during the Iranian revolution. The graphic novels in this article provided context to historical agents lives, and allowed pre-service teachers to consider the choices comprised in their historical agency.

Historical agency is considered a foundational element of historical understanding (Seixas, 1993), but has only been emphasized recently in the literature (Clark, 2013b; Barton, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Damico, Baildon, & Greenstone, 2010; Damico, Baildon, & Lowenstein, 2008; den Heyer, 2007; Peck et al., 2011). Aspects of historical agency have also been emphasized in studies examining the ways students explained the actions of people in the past (Kohlmeier, 2006; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Mosborg, 2002; Peck, 2010; Seixas & Clark, 2004; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Willis, 2005). Several researchers have even suggested that students develop personal agency when they engage in historical thinking (Anderson & Day, 2005; Barton, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2008; Nye et al., 2011; Seixas, 2000; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001) through critical engagement, empathy, moral reasoning, and self-reflection. While there are a small number of recent studies that examine how pre-service teachers learn the concept of historical thinking (Bohan & Davis, 1998; Clark, 2013a; Fragnoli, 2005; Levstik, 2000; Mayer, 2006; Monte-Sano & Cochran, 2009; Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012; Salinas & Sullivan, 2007; Seixas, 1998), there are no studies that specifically examine how pre-service
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teachers learn about or understand aspects of historical agency, such as historical agents’ choices.

Since this article is focused on the choices of historical agents that constitute historical agency, I will use Barton’s (2012) definition of agency, “the ability to act on decisions in order to bring about desired goals (whether those involve changing aspects of society or conserving them)” (p. 132). This definition demonstrates the simple but integral role agency plays in students’ understanding of history and their development of historical thinking skills. Sexias (1993) similarly described the relationship between agency and historical thinking, “historical agency is necessary for conceptualizing people’s interactions with the social and cultural circumstances in which they found themselves. Without this tool, students cannot see themselves as operating in the same realm as the historical figures whom they are studying” (p. 303). The concept of historical agency enables students to understand the actions of people in the past as decisions made from a range of choices, in order to compare and contrast with their own daily lives.

Many historical accounts distort the choices of historical agents, which can make it difficult for teachers to teach about historical agency. Distorted historical accounts gloss over the how people in the past faced circumstances and made decisions that resulted in a variety of consequences (Seixas, 1993). These distorted historical accounts allow teachers and ultimately students, to avoid moral judgments about people in the past (Barton, 2012). These accounts, for example, often make social changes seem inevitable, instead of the concerted work of individuals. Inevitability in historical accounts can also dismiss any accountability to the appropriate historical agent for the consequences of their actions. Some historical accounts may omit actors all together from the historical situation. As James Damico et al. (2008) described, omission can be done simply through grammatical devices, such as passive voice (e.g. “The bombs were dropped on Tokyo every day and night”) (p. 54). Historical accounts and historical pedagogy can traffic in presentism. This sort of distortion is often seen in historical issues involving human rights. In many cases, the oppressors are described as merely products of their time, and ultimately absolved of their actions. Avoiding moral judgment in this way also avoids discussing issues of power, as Barton (2012) noted:

To say that slavery was acceptable then (as students and teachers often do) is hardly accurate; it would be more accurate to say that those who benefited from slavery went to great lengths to convince themselves and others that it was acceptable. (p. 139)

In terms of multiple perspectives and human choice, it is important for teachers and students to understand people dissented and made different choices. Often historical accounts only provide the prevailing view of the historical situation. Understanding people made different choices in the same historical situation fosters more informed judgments. I used the detailed narratives of graphic novels in this study as an attempt to address the distortions of traditional historical accounts, and give my pre-service teachers an opportunity to consider individuals’ historical agency.

The Study

The findings presented here are drawn from a larger critical action research study in which I wanted to better understand the ways secondary social studies methods students think about agency. Specific to this article, I had found that pre-service teachers struggled with the concept of historical agency so, I chose action research methodology in an effort to refine my
teaching in a way to address the pre-service teachers perceived challenges with understanding historical agency. Action research, as described in Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993), is the “systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (p. 23). A systematic approach to research provides “ordered ways of gathering and recording information, documenting experiences” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, p. 23), whereas intentional inquiry implies that action researchers make deliberate choices regarding their research aims and data collection. I combined critical with action research because of the focus on connecting historical agency and agency, which requires pre-service teachers to think critically about the affordances and constraints of economic, social, and political structures in history, as well as in the present.

Action research is a powerful means with which to examine an educational context because it offers deep, contextual examples of theory and practice intertwined as action, and the consequences of that action. The purpose of this study was to inform my own teaching to better prepare pre-service teachers for the history classroom, and to develop their understanding of historical agency that will inform their future teaching. Action research, as a method, suited my purpose as a researcher; as McNiff noted (2013, p.19), “Action research should never be perceived as only about actions, but also as about thinking, and how a particular form of thinking informs a particular form of action”. I wanted to study my own practice as well as the experiences of my students in order to identify ways of refining my practice, while offering my experience as a point of reference for larger conversations and modes of thinking about social studies teacher education. As an action researcher, I view knowledge as something I do because “people generate their own knowledge from living and learning” (McNiff, 2013, p. 29). The systematic, intentional methods I used in this study will make my experiences, as well as my pre-service teachers’ experiences, part of a continuing dialogue about historical agency and effective ways of developing an understanding of historical agency.

The study was undertaken in my social studies methods course at a large Midwestern state university. The 19 participants in this study were undergraduate pre-service social studies teachers, including 12 female students and 7 male students, two whom identified as Latino. Nearly all of the participants were in their last semester of coursework before their student teaching experience. Pre-service teachers had taken most of their coursework including: a content literacy course, an entry-level social studies methods course, and content-based courses in other departments. As instructor and researcher, I wanted my students to consider graphic novels as a regular part of the course, and specifically as one of many resources to teach and develop historical thinking skills. I had not combined my lessons on historical agency and graphic novels in previous semesters, and for this study, the pre-service teachers read the graphic novels for one class period, and then we used examples from their graphic novels in the following class period for our discussion of historical agency.

I structured the study so each PST would choose one nonfiction graphic novel and form a literature circle with at least two other classmates. This resulted in six groups with each PST choosing one of the six graphic novels mentioned above. The pre-service teachers, therefore, chose their graphic novels based on their own interests, as well as common interests with some of their classmates. The students read their novel and engaged in group discussions for approximately one hour during class. We then discussed all of the novels as an entire class for 35 minutes. The data sources for this study included: audio recordings of each literature group
discussion (LGD); an audio recording of the whole class discussion (WCD); post-it notes, on which students recorded their thoughts while reading the novels; and individual interviews with all 21 students, conducted by the researcher at the end of the semester. The in-class group and whole class discussions happened during the eleventh week of the course, the post-it notes were also collected the 11th week, and the interviews were completed during the 15th week of the course.

I used a constant-comparative data analysis method, which allowed me to compare similar types of data within the six literature groups, as well as across the whole class (Creswell, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The literature group discussions were analyzed separately for an initial list of codes. These codes were narrowed to a list of codes found across all six of the literature groups. The whole class discussion transcript was scanned for data that supported the narrowed list of codes found across the literature groups. All other data sources were scanned to triangulate the codes found across the literature groups and in the whole class discussion. All of the data sources were analyzed a second time and focused on a narrowed list of the four most common codes. Following the second analysis, these codes were reduced to three and represent the findings sections of this paper.

**Historical Agents’ Choices in Graphic Novels**

Pre-service teachers in this study read graphic novels providing context for the circumstances of historical agents’ actions. Pre-service teachers’ consideration of circumstances prompted them to make connections to the agents’ choice of actions. The pre-service teachers made connections to the historical agents’ choices based upon their upbringing and personal experiences, the unpredictability of the historical situation, and the injustice at the heart of the historical situation.

**Upbringing and Personal Experiences**

In thinking about the historical agents’ actions, pre-service teachers carefully considered the upbringing and personal experiences of the agents. The pre-service teachers’ consideration of agents’ past experiences was especially apparent in their readings on Che Guevara and Malcolm X. In both cases, pre-service teachers used the historical agents’ past experiences to connect to contemporary issues and evaluate their choices.

In the *Che* (Jacobson & Colon, 2009) literature group, the pre-service teachers were surprised to learn about Che’s privileged upbringing and medical training, which by Ben’s account “didn’t match his revolutionary persona” (LGD, 11/10/2010). The group’s discussion focused on Che’s privileged upbringing, to which Chelsea noted, “It is so strange, he was educated and charismatic, you know, and people liked him a lot. I just think he could have helped the movement in different ways” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Marcus agreed, but identified the constraints of the power structure in Central and South America, “I don’t think he had much choice because of all of the corruption in those countries, and like the dictators and military were too powerful - remember he saw all of that on his trip” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Chelsea acknowledged these constraints, but noted:

> I think it is good for us to see that he [Che] had power too and powerful friends….MLK faced, like, similar challenges and used nonviolence…I’m just saying Che was smart enough and powerful enough to push change without fighting…think what he could have done if he hadn’t died. (LGD, 11/10/2010)
The group employed historical agency as a tool in their consideration of Che as an individual whose experiences both enabled and constrained the choices he made for desired goals and social ends. Chelsea compared Che to Martin Luther King Jr. because she thought they were enabled and constrained in similar ways, yet made qualitatively different choices to pursue their goals.

After considering the implications of Che’s experiences, the group thought Che’s privileged upbringing and education could have informed and shaped his choices more as an adult. Chelsea recognized Che could have chosen to act in different, but equally powerful ways. Ben also noted the significance of Che’s choices in his interview, when asked if he would use Che in his future classroom:

I think I would use it…to show students that he wasn’t just a revolutionary, I mean he gave up everything, like a really good life in Argentina, to fight corrupt leaders in other countries…and the students would see the problems in Latin America that like really drew him to the revolution. I think students would be able to understand that as a rare act, and maybe relate to it. (Interview, 12/08/2010)

Ben believed that the significance of Che’s choice—giving up everything—would be a powerful connection for his students, as it was for him.

The literature group that read Malcolm X (Helfer & DeBurke, 2006) also discussed Malcolm’s early upbringing and experiences. Instead of questioning Malcolm’s actions based upon his past experiences, this group rationalized his choices based upon his experiences. They spent a significant amount of time discussing Malcolm’s distressing adolescent experiences. The group discussed “the suspicious death of his father,” his mother “going crazy,” foster care, and “the teacher [who] shot down his aspirations” (Jen, Kevin, & Thomas, LGD, 11/10/2010). Mary connected these distressing events to Malcolm’s choices, “I totally understand, well, why he was more violent and like confrontational toward people, I think he did pretty good considering all of the things he saw and experienced” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Kevin empathized on some level, “I don’t know what I would’ve done…I can’t imagine being treated that like over and over” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Jen built upon her group’s comments and noted how Malcolm’s unfortunate experiences could have informed his leadership, “He had felt extreme racism and I think people saw that, people knew that is where like his intensity came from, so people who had felt the same thing wanted to follow him…or trust him even” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Thomas also commented on Malcolm’s choices as a leader and related it to his experiences:

I couldn’t believe what he said when president Kennedy was shot, but then I thought about like what he said about the Martin Luther King speech—remember, the nightmare—and I think that is the way he was, he always like tried to relate to people who were suffering like he had. (LGD, 11/10/2010)

The group thought Malcolm’s leadership choices were directly tied to his difficult experiences growing-up, and while they did not necessarily agree with his choices, they were able to use historical agency as a tool to rationalize his choices.

The group rationalized Malcolm’s strength as a relatable leader due to his experiences. In the individual interviews, when I asked the group members if they would use this book in their future classrooms, three students said they would use the book and referenced Malcolm’s appeal to the United Nations. Kevin said, “Towards the end when he was kinda by himself and on his Hajj, and he wanted to go to the UN…I never knew he moved toward non-violence, and I think students need to see that sort of change” (Interview, 12/06/2010). Kevin thought the most
valuable connection from the book, for his future students, was to understand a choice Malcolm made, despite his past experiences. The group found value in Malcolm X’s shift because it could demonstrate to their students how experiences could both shape actions and inform change in one’s actions.

**Unpredictable Historical Situations**

Pre-service teachers also considered the unpredictable nature of historical situations as determinate of historical agents’ choices. The consideration of unpredictable historical situations was especially apparent in the groups that read about Hurricane Katrina and the Iranian Revolution. The first group read *A.D. New Orleans after the Deluge* (Neufield, 2009). Since the novel is focused on five characters’ experiences with Hurricane Katrina, the group’s discussion focused on the characters’ decisions to stay or leave the city of New Orleans as the category five storm approached. The group was able to discuss what they would have done if they had found themselves in the same situations as the characters; however, the unpredictability of the storm disallowed them to make a clear judgment about their choices.

In their discussion, the pre-service teachers focused on the casual nature in which each person dealt with the news of the imminent storm. One student, Kara, noted one couple in the novel who used their prior experiences to make a decision about leaving, “Everybody had seen the weathermen predict it wrong so many times they weren’t that worried…you know the waitress thought that it would change direction, as usual” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Jack focused on the Iranian storekeeper who sent his family to Houston but decided to stay and protect his store from looters, “It was weird, the storekeeper sent his family away, but he stayed and thought it would be fun kinda…so he knew it was bad, but still not bad enough for him to leave” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Genna followed up by saying, “Yeah, I mean the doctor just had a party, so he just thought they were blowing the storm way out of proportion” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Tawny responded to her group, and discussed the magnitude of the decision to leave, “I think it might be worse, even though they left, they had to wonder about their belongings and like the comic book guy just had to guess based on news reports, if you left…you couldn’t protect your stuff” (LGD, 11/10/2010). The group used historical agency as a tool to make sense of the actors’ choices, and they were torn due to the unpredictable circumstances.

Genna started to think about possible alternative consequences, and helped the group think about the event in a different way. Genna noted, “I guess though, I mean, the waitress and comic book guy would have probably been hurt or died if they hadn’t gone to Houston, but the shopkeeper was fine…so it just depended on where you were at the re” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Genna’s comment helped the group realize the actors’ choices were based heavily on their situation. They realized it was difficult to make generalized decisions about who was right or wrong in their reaction to the news and warnings to leave. Jack followed-up with, “We heard their stories because they made the right decision…but a lot of other people thought they were making the right decision too and didn’t make it [died]. It helped me realize…there are not always right choices, just better ones.” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Jack’s comment represents just one of the connections the group made to the agents’ choices. Jack drew upon the unpredictability of the storm as constraint, and noted that people made decisions to the best of their ability.

The second group read *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2004) and focused on the abruptness of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and the war with Iraq. They felt these events deeply affected the
choices that people made while consumed in these conflicts. Allie made a comment that prompted much of the groups’ discussion. Allie said:

I couldn’t help thinking about how when her family and friends left for the US, how that affects her and like others that stayed. I was just thinking about her pictures of the religious women and the modern women, if a lot of modern women left that affects those modern women who stayed behind. (LGD, 11/10/2010)

Allie felt the people who left Iran during, or right after, the revolution made the new government and their policies much stronger. Allie realized the choice made by some Iranians to leave not only affected their own lives, but also the lives of others in Iran who thought differently than the new government. Bess built upon Allie’s comment and said, “Yeah, I didn’t think about that…and some people probably couldn’t afford to leave, so they would just be deserted by those who could help them” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Allie’s thoughts helped the group use historical agency to realize the choices Iranians made to leave, which had originally been simple decisions due to the rules of the new government, were actual complex decisions that affected the whole country.

Further along in the discussion, Tom described he understood Allie and Bess’s point, yet he still thought that they could not place blame on the Iranians who chose to leave after the revolution. Tom commented, “I…don’t know what I would have done, but I probably would not be thinking about other people or make this huge decision based on like a possibility…I….would be concerned mostly about the well-being of my family” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Tara and Bess both agreed, and Tara said “I don’t think they [Allie and Bess] meant that…it is a really complex situation, no doubt…no one knew what was going to happen” (LGD, 11/10/2010). The group discussed the unpredictability of a revolution and the difficult choices people had to make. The connections they made to agents in the situation shifted their interpretations of agents’ choices to the complexity of the unpredictable situation.

Injustice

Pre-service teachers also considered injustice that stemmed from racism and prejudice as influences on historical agents’ choices. The focus on injustice was especially apparent in the discussions of two groups. One group read Gettysburg (Butzer, 2008), and they discussed the effect of the battle on the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Much of the discussion focused on how the people of the town reacted after the battle. Bob mentioned the page of the graphic novel in which the author depicts the town singing “John Brown’s Song” outside of the building where President Lincoln was staying in Gettysburg. Bob said, “Despite the loss of men and the devastation to the town, the people sang about John Brown to show their support for President Lincoln…that had to like really boost Lincoln and what he chose to do in the war” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Phillip followed-up and said “It just shows how strong slavery was for people, to just accept the war and what it did to their lives” (LGD, 11/10/2012). Bob was a bit surprised the townspeople would be so supportive of the civil war effort, yet Phillip thought that the injustice of slavery strongly influenced the townspeople’s choices. Tony, however, contrasted what his group mates thought and noted, “I don’t think they were probably all hunky dory about it afterward, but they just did the best they could given the situation they’re in” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Tony thought that his group mates were overstating the townspeople’s agency, and that they chose to do the right thing given the circumstances they found themselves. This group
used historical agency to think about actors not often discussed with the civil war and how their choices could have had a huge impact on the war.  

As the discussion progressed, Bob and Phillip both questioned Tony’s point. Phillip asked Tony, “Don’t you think that they [the townspeople] felt part of something larger that made them want to show their support?” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Bob agreed with the question and Tony responded:

Yeah, I mean that is what made them do the right thing…right…I mean if the war was about taxes, or states trading, or I don’t know…things would not have been the same.
They supported it because of their feelings about slavery…that’s how I read it at least.
And I feel the same way, I want a flat tax, but I am not willing to go to war over it.
(LGD, 11/10/2010).

Tony thought people made choices during the civil war based on their beliefs about justice, and that they would not have made the same choices if different issues had created the circumstances.

I asked each of the group members about this exchange in their interviews and Phillip gave the most reflective answer, “I thought about it afterward, and maybe Tony was right, maybe that’s why the support for World War II was different than Vietnam…and even the wars now…the injustice just isn’t there as much, I don’t know, just speculating” (Interview, 12/06/2010). This group viewed the choices of historical agents as deeply tied to the circumstances of their situation, and in the case of Gettysburg, deeply tied to the injustice of slavery as an institution. They were able to make connections to contemporary issues and wars in thinking about their own possible choices.

The second group read Anne Frank (Jacobson & Colon, 2010) and considered the Frank family’s choices during the rise of fascism in Germany and the Netherlands. Amy, Andrea, and Melinda each demonstrated interest in the map that showed the places that German Jews had immigrated to, as well as the estimated number for each country. Their interest led to a discussion of the Frank family’s decision to immigrate to the Netherlands. Melinda noted, “I never knew why they chose the Netherlands till this book…and now I wish so much that they would have gone to England or somewhere else” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Amy quickly responded, “I couldn’t believe all of the chances they had to go somewhere else, things could’ve been different I guess” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Melinda and Amy were both troubled by the consequences of the Frank’s choice to go to the Netherlands, especially in light of the alternatives. Andrea thought more about the situation the Franks were in, “They didn’t know how bad Hitler was going to be, they moved to Holland with the long term in mind, I think if it had been more dangerous they would have left without plans and maybe gone far away” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Amy responded, “Yeah, once Hitler invaded [the Netherlands] they were trapped, they said” (LGD, 11/10/2010). This group used historical agency to think about how the Frank’s life could have been different if they had made different choices.

This group’s discussion moved into the possible reasons why the Franks didn’t leave, or as Melinda asked, “Why didn’t they send the girls to England when they had the chance? Like their friends, I think” (LGD, 11/10/2010). After a bit of discussion, Amy said “I think they thought that eventually it would stop, you know, like, people would do what was right or maybe that they would stand-up to Hitler” (LGD, 11/10/2010). Melinda responded, “Right, like if it happened today, we would think it was so ridiculous or just one crazy guy and somebody will stop him…maybe that’s what they thought” (LGD, 11/10/2010). While thinking about the
unfortunate circumstances of the Frank family’s choices, this group thought about the choices of
the rest of society who allowed the unjust acts of Hitler and the Nazis to continue. This group
thought that the Franks made choices based on their belief that the collective agency of their
fellow citizens and human beings would eventually do the right thing and stop the persecution.
Melinda was able to rationalize the Frank’s choice by making connections to her, and possibly
others, perspective in the present.

Understanding Historical Agency in Graphic Novels
The pre-service teachers’ discussion of historical agents’ choices demonstrated that
graphic novels could depict historical accounts in complex and engaging ways. The graphic
novels provided the pre-service teachers an opportunity to engage with historical content and
make-sense of the circumstances of historical agents’ actions. The narratives, drawing from
traditional primary and secondary sources, provided a reliable historical source for the pre-
service teachers to interpret and contextualize the choices of historical agents. The pre-service
teachers were able to consider the historical agent’s choices as a primary construct of their
historical agency. The pre-service teachers’ discussions and reflections suggested there are
several reasons social studies methods instructors should consider engaging pre-service teachers
in thinking about historical agency, either with graphic novels or other detailed narratives, to
develop a conceptual understanding of historical agency, and its role as a tool in the social
studies classroom.

One of these reasons centered on pre-service teachers ability to identify aspects of
historical agency in graphic novels in order to use historical agency, even before we talked about
the concept in the course. Pre-service teachers were able to understand the reasons or intentions
behind the historical agents’ choices, and then contextualize the actions related to those choices.
In most cases, the pre-service teachers’ were able to understand the historical agent’s choice of
action on a much deeper level because they considered the possibility agents’ had choices that
they did not pursue (e.g. Che’s choice to join Fidel Castro instead of non-violent action; New
Orleans citizens choice to stay or flee Katrina; The Franks choice of country for immigration).
Pre-service teachers consideration of agents’ alternative choices helped the pre-service teachers
understand why the historical agents’ chose particular courses of action, as well as how the
circumstances of the situation influenced the agents’ choices. Lee and Ashby (2001) noted the
importance of this consideration for historical thinking:

In order to understand actions and institutions in terms of reasons, beliefs and values, we
must be able to see how something could be a reason for action or belief….It is not
merely knowing that certain historical agents or groups had a particular view on their
world, but being able to see how that perspective would actually have affected actions in
particular circumstances. (p. 24)

The historical accounts comprised in graphic novels enabled pre-service teachers to understand
how experiences and circumstances affected historical agents’ actions. The detailed portrayal of
both the circumstances and consequences in these historical accounts allowed the pre-service
teachers to consider historical agents’ alternative choices, and helped pre-service teachers avoid
understanding these significant historical events and situations as simply inevitable.

A second reason focused on pre-service teachers ability to make connections between
historical agency and their own agency due to the way historical agents positionality was
developed in graphic novels. As demonstrated in Jason Endacott (2010) sources which clearly
shape historical agents’ positionality are important in developing connections for the reader and wrote, “the use of sources that clearly define a decision maker’s positionality and how that positionality conflicts with external pressures are instrumental in the development of an affective connection” (p. 35). The format of graphics, focused on the interactions of historical agents, provided historical accounts that emphasized their positionality conflicting with the external pressures they faced and developed connections between their experiences, intentions, circumstances, and actions. These connections facilitated pre-service teachers use of historical agency as a tool to identify and understand historical agents’ positionality. Pre-service teachers were then able to understand the consequences of historical agents’ actions as “the outcomes of conscious choices (whether intended or not)” (Barton, 2012, p. 140). By understanding the historical agents’ actions as the result of a conscious choice, both the normalcy and the significance of the action was expanded in the pre-service teachers’ understanding, which enabled pre-service teachers to make connections to their own agency.

The connections pre-service teachers made between historical agency and their own agency were especially evident in their identification of historical agents’ decisions that they had previously not considered historically relevant. These decisions were evident in each of the groups’ discussions of historical agents’ choices: Che Guevara’s decision not to practice medicine; Malcom X’s decision to appeal to the U.N. after his Hajj; New Orleans citizens’ decisions to stay and experience Katrina; Iranian citizens’ decisions to leave the country after the Islamic revolution; Gettysburg citizens’ decision to show support for President Lincoln; and the Frank family’s decision to stay together in the Netherlands. The pre-service teachers were able to make connections to many of these historical accounts because they emphasized the historical agents’ positionality that conceivably influenced their decisions. Pre-service teachers were able to relate to, or at least imaginatively engage with, the historical agents decisions, and consider how the circumstances of historical situations can lead to unintended consequences, despite historical agents’ well-reasoned decisions.

This study will inform my future courses because I will be able to emphasize the connections the pre-service teachers’ were able to make to their own agency. As reiterated in Barton (2012), teachers need “to make connections between historical agency and agency in the present” (p. 140), and these connections were apparent across the graphic novels. As human beings, the pre-service teachers were able to relate to the historical agents significant and influential experiences, the unpredictability of life, and the injustice that exists in the world. Pre-service teachers were able to connect with the backgrounds and experiences of each historical agent because they were among the most significant influences on the historical agents’ choices, and the most logical justification for the consequences of their actions. Pre-service teachers were also able to connect with the unpredictability historical agents faced, which equally justified the historical agents’ choices and also the unjustified consequences of the historical agents’ choices. These pre-service teachers connected with the historical agents’ commitment to justice, which they viewed as the most significant influence on their choices and justified by other historical agents’ adherence to racism and prejudice. Each of these connections was relevant because the pre-service teachers could imagine their own positionality and making decisions based on these aspects of historical agency. Pre-service teachers used historical agency as a tool to understand the reasons for historical agents’ choices, and through their understanding they were able to connect with the historical agents and think about their own agency in the present.
References


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