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

J. Spencer Clark*, Steven P. Camicia

Utah State University, Department of Teacher Education and Leadership, 2805 Old Main Hill, Logan, UT 84322, USA

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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 aske`d 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.

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

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: spencer.clark@usu.edu (J.S. Clark).

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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 Survivors' 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.

Conceptual lenses and related literature

In examining our students' thinking about agency, we used three conceptual lenses to frame our description, interpretation, and analysis of data. First, we considered the concept of historical agency as a tool for readers to think about historical accounts in texts. Historical agency has been considered a foundational element of historical understanding (Seixas, 1993), but has primarily been discussed only recently in the literature (Barton, 2011; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Damico, Baildon, & Greenstone, 2010; Damico, Baildon, & Lowenstein, 2008; den Heyer, 2003; Peck, Poyntz, & Seixas, 2011). Aspects of historical agency have also been discussed in studies that examined how students explained the actions of people in the past (Barton, 1997; Brophy & VanSledright, 1997; Kohlmeier, 2006; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Lee, Dickinson, & Ashby, 1997; Mosborg, 2002; Peck, 2010; Seixas & Clark, 2004; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Willis, 2005). Some researchers have even concluded that students develop their own sense of agency when they engage in historical thinking (Anderson & Day, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 2008; Nye et al., 2011; Seixas, 2000; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001) through critical engagement, empathy, moral reasoning, and reflection on the self. While there are a small number of recent studies that examine how pre-service teachers learn about historical thinking (Bohan & Davis, 1998; Fragnoli, 2005; Levstik, 2000; Mayer, 2006; Monte-Sano & Cochran, 2009; Salinas, Blevins, & Sullivan, 2012; Salinas & Sullivan, 2007; Seixas, 1998), there are no studies that look specifically at how pre-service teachers learn about or understand historical agency.

Future social studies teachers need to develop a clear conception of historical agency because it is essential for guiding students' inquiry into historical events. In thinking about the past, students should be able to learn about a historical event and assign responsibility to historical actors for their decisions, while also determining the societal structures that influenced and shaped the historical actors' decisions (Lee & Ashby, 2001). A major aspect of thinking about historical agency requires students to consider the circumstances in which historical actors made decisions. As Seixas (1993) noted, historical agency is a principal element in historical thinking because it is required "for conceptualizing people's interactions with the social and cultural circumstances in which they found themselves" (303). As a tool for historical thinking, historical agency allows students to simultaneously consider the basic questions of history, while also adding complexity to their thinking and complicating their judgments about people's actions in the past.

Graphic novels and other historical narratives are increasingly considered a valuable way for students to engage with components of historical thinking, such as agency, and develop historical understanding (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Clark, 2013; Ehlers, 1999; Endacott, 2010; Olwell, 1999; Wineburg, 2001). The concept of historical agency, however, can be difficult for students to grasp because of the way that many historical actions are portrayed in historical texts. This provides teachers with an added challenge in teaching about historical agency. Many historical texts often assign responsibility for actions, and sometimes even human attributes, to societal institutions (nations, international alliances, religious denominations), which leads students to assign agency to non-human entities (Barton, 1997; Clark, Weber, & Barton, 2011; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Lee et al., 1997). This type of non-human agency can also extend to ideas or movements, such as nationalism. In this case, with the absence of identifiable historical actors, students are led to understand agency as the result of inevitable forces and not human actions or decisions (Barton, 2011). In some historical texts, the author leaves the agent completely out of the historical act all together. For example, Damico et al. (2008) identified this issue in young adult literature that discussed the dropping of the atomic bomb in World War II, "The description of the action, i.e., American pilots dropping the bomb, has been reduced to 'an explosion,' 'a flash,' and 'a blinding light'" (p. 54). Depicting a historical event in this manner avoids assigning responsibility to any human agent, such as American pilots or President Truman. Also, the passivity of historical texts can depict marginalized groups as the victims in historical events, which denies their equal stake as actors. Historical depictions of this nature support the traditional narrative of western history and imply that the powerful were the sole actors in historical events. Additionally, depicting agency in this manner can further intensify the disempowerment and marginalization of some groups. It can be a challenge for teachers to engage students with historical agency because they have to navigate students' thinking through numerous overlapping and often contradictory factors, just to accurately consider the actors in each historical event (Barton, 2011). Therefore, it is vital that future history and social studies teachers understand the concept of historical agency in order to shape their students' historical thinking skills.

As a component of historical thinking, engaging students with historical agency is equally a challenge and a vital task for students in a democratic society (den Heyer, 2003; Peck et al., 2011). Historical thinking is a challenge because it is not a natural part of an individual's psychological development and "goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think" (Wineburg, 2001, p.7). When students are provided evidence about the past, regardless of the form, it is comfortable for them to simply resort to presentism, or come "to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of [their] lived experience" (Wineburg, 2001, p. 23). The narrowness of most students' lives in the present makes it difficult for them to contextualize the actions of people in the past, and actually reflects a limitation to understand diverse perspectives in the present (Wineburg, 2001). In terms of historical agency, if students do not fully contextualize the actions of people in the past, they could fail to recognize that people in the past potentially had choices – just as they have choices in the present. It is common for students to simply praise or condemn the actions of historical actors, instead of thinking about the actors' potential choices, employing their own moral reasoning (Nye et al., 2011) or ethical framework, and making reasoned judgments about the actors' courses of action.

The challenge of future social studies teachers to contextualize the choices of historical actors not only has implications for their students' understanding of the past but also for their students' understanding of the present and future. Teaching that focuses on historical agency illustrates the purpose of learning about history in a democratic society because it

highlights the choices people had and the decisions they made, among a range of rational alternatives. These choices, decisions, and alternatives that comprise historical agency can often be connected to agency in the present. Students are able to see themselves functioning in the same ethical realm as historical actors (Seixas, 1993) because the choices and decisions of historical actors often represent moral judgments which they are confronted with in their everyday lives. This connection and process of realization is important because "moral judgment is the most basic of all functions of democratic citizens" (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 138), and the social studies curriculum should help students "continually refine and justify the moral and ethical principles they are using in the process of decision making" (p. 22). A focus on historical agency highlights the tension in making decisions among a host of competing rational alternatives, which is at the core of democratic participation (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Furthermore, a focus on historical agency highlights the constraints that societal factors, forces, or institutions impose on an actor's decision-making process. Thus, a deeper understanding of historical agency can help students understand the complex relationship between citizens and their society, and more importantly, potential paths to changing or preserving aspects of their society.

For us to consider the complexity of historical agency in the pre-service teachers' experiences with graphic novels, we use Damico et al. (2010) definition of historical agency as a lens to understand the pre-service teachers' evaluative comments. They defined historical agency as:

> The relationship between structural forces that shape historical events and the ways people influence and shape, are affected by these events. That is, human beings are autonomous agents with abilities to affect change, yet there are social structures that constrain and limit what individuals can do. (Damico et al., 2010, p. 2).

The relationship between structural forces and historical actors was the primary aspect of agency that we wanted our pre-service teachers to consider, and graphic novels provided a unique form of historical narrative that brought the relationship between the structural forces and the historical actors to the forefront of the historical event.

Our second lens focused upon the students understanding of agency. We used agency in the Foucauldian sense, where subjectivity and truth are central to a political sense of ethics (Foucault, 1997). In this sense, ethics involves understanding how subjects are formed by society and its institutions. Ethical behavior, then, would involve agency toward a radical freedom that is beyond the constraints of any one system of beliefs. Societal institutions such as schools, prisons, and hospitals have functioned to regulate understandings of what it means to be a subject in a society. In the process, individuals understand subjectivity through categories that are cultural products of institutions. The same can be said about knowledge. Institutions and society dictate what knowledge is valued and what knowledge is not valued. An ethical person would examine institutions and society in order to create new understandings related to issues of social justice. We used this sense of ethics to guide our study of pre-service teachers' understanding of historical agency and the judgments they made regarding historical actors decisions. The pre-service teachers in our study were asked to engage with graphic novels in order to examine agency as a form of ethical behavior within sociocultural constraints. They were asked to reexamine what it means to be an ethical subject that forms and is formed by structures. This focus adds complexity to an understanding of the interaction between structures and human agency.

For our third lens we used discourse analysis of text and images. Discourse analysis helped identify the ways pre-service teachers understand how agency, subjectivity, and truth are related within the context of history and social studies instruction. This understanding of agency was relational to individuals and institutions as they were represented in graphic novels. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) provided guidance on the analytical relationships and grammar captured in figures:

> Figures (and other kinds of visual) involve two kinds of participants, *represented participants* (the people, the places and things depicted in figures) and *interactive participants* (the people who communicate with each other *through* figures, the producers and viewers of figures), and three kind of relations: (1) relations between *represented participants*; (2) relations between interactive and represented participants (the interactive participants' attitudes towards the represented participants); and (3) relations between interactive participants (the things interactive participants do to or for each other through figures). (p. 114)

The pre-service teachers illustrated each of these relationships through their engagement with the graphic novels.

In combination, we use these lenses, Foucauldian ethics and discourse analysis of imagery, to understand the ways that pre-service teachers articulated and understood historical agency through their engagement with graphic novels.

Data and methods

We designed our research as a case study (Yin, 2003) that was conducted over a three-week period at Maple Grove University (MGU), a public research university in the Western United States. We used theoretical sampling techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in order to focus our research on development of theory and concepts related to the study of secondary social studies methods student's engagement with visual texts and their thinking about agency. The sample was also of some convenience due to one of the researcher's role as an instructor of the methods course. There were 21 total participants in this study, which included 17 female students and four male students (See Table 1). We focused on six

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Gender		**Age**			**Social class** (self-identified)				**Home locale**		
M	*F*	*21–23*	*24–26*	*27+*	*Lower*	*Low middle*	*Middle*	*Upper middle*	*Rural*	*Suburban*	*Urban*
4	17	15	5	1	2	8	10	1	7	12	2

Table 2
Positionalities.

Subject	**Gender**	**Age**	**Social class** (self-identified)	**Home locale**	**Content area(s)** (major/minor)
Brody	Male	26	Middle	Suburban	History/ESL
Dara	Female	21	Middle	Urban	Social Studies
Mandi	Female	21	Upper Middle	Suburban	Math/History
Marcus	Male	24	Low Middle	Suburban	Social Studies
Patty	Female	22	Middle	Rural	English/History
Ryann	Female	21	Low Middle	Rural	Social Studies/English

participants (see Table 2) for this article that were representative of group and the coding categories, which are discussed below. Only four of the participants had read a graphic novel prior to the social studies methods course.

The activity for this study was part of the regular class assignments, and demonstrated a method for students to engage with texts. For the activity, each participant chose and read a historically based nonfiction graphic novel from a list (List of relevant historical graphic novels) that we provided. The graphic novels chosen by the participants included: *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* (Jacobson & Colon, 2006), which provide details of the actual 9/11 report and circumstances and events leading up to the attack; *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (Neufield, 2009), which documents the experiences of five distinct New Orleans citizens during Hurricane Katrina; *Anne Frank: The Graphic Biography* (Jacobson & Colon, 2010), which presents a biographical sketch of Anne Frank before and during her time of hiding and the writing of her famous diary; *Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel* (Butzer, 2008), which provides a brief depiction of the battle at Gettysburg that provides accounts from soldiers and civilians; *The Kite Runner: The Graphic Novel* (Hosseini, 2011), which presents an abridged version of the award winning novel about two boys from different social classes in Afghanistan; *Maus: A Survivors Tale* (Spiegelman, 1986), which provides an account of one man's experience in and after the Holocaust told by his son; *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2004), which is a coming of age account of one girl's experience growing up in Iran before, during, and after the Islamic Revolution; *The United States Constitution: The Graphic Adaptation* (Hennessey, 2008), which is an adaptation of the US Constitution that provides context for many of the amendments and articles; *We Are on Our Own* (Katin, 2006), which provides an account of a mother and daughter's experience during World War II in Hungary. Once the participants had read their graphic novel they were asked to: (1) add 3–5 frames to any portion of their graphic novel; (2) re-narrate 3–5 frames of their graphic novel; (3) reflect and justify their additions to, and re-narrations of, their graphic novel. The participants then discussed the experience in the next class period as both a small group and a whole class discussion. The topics of the discussion included the utility and content of graphic novels, the activity as a method of engaging with texts, and the concepts of agency and historical agency in texts.

There were four main sources of participant data collected over the four weeks of this study, which included the participants' purpose statements, illustrations and narrations, written reflections, and interviews. The participants wrote their purpose statements during the third week of the methods course. As mentioned above, the participants were asked to add to and re-narrate small parts of the graphic novels. For this, the participants illustrated and narrated their own frames related to the graphic novel they read. The participants' written reflections captured their general thoughts in reading the graphic novels and also further articulated the decisions they made in their illustrations and narrations. Lastly, interviews were conducted and audio recorded after the participants had completed the first two data sources. Students were able to further articulate their decisions when revising their graphic novels. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min in length.

The data analysis for this study began by examining the participants' illustrations and narrations, as well as the written reflections. Based upon the relational categories described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) above, initial codes were established to analyze images and the students' revisions of graphic sequences. These categories allowed us to sort the participants into the three groups represented by six participants in this article. Then, we analyzed the written reflections and interviews to refine categories and extend this analysis to our interpretations. Reconstructive horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996) was also used to capture a bounded range of possible meanings in order to examine the objective, normative, and subjective claims in the participants' narrations and responses. Reconstruction horizon analysis allowed us

Table 3
Participant graphic novel choice and findings.

Subject	Graphic novel choice	Image-participant relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)	Revisions regarding agency
Dara	*The Kite Runner: The Graphic Novel*	Represented participants	Emphasized ethnicity and social class as constraining historical actors' actions
Mandi	*Persepolis*	Represented participants	Emphasized the role of social institutions as constraining historical actors' actions
Ryann	*Maus: A Survivors Tale*	Interactive and represented participants	Changed historical actors discriminatory actions to fit her own ethics
Marcus	*Gettysburg: The Graphic Novel*	Interactive and Represented Participants	Highlighted the complex decisions behind actions to empathize with historical actors
Brody	*The United States Constitution: The Graphic Adaptation*	Interactive participants	Critiqued author for assigning too much agency to historical actors
Patty	*A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge*	Interactive participants	Critiqued author for assigning too little agency to historical actors

to highlight the noticeable and tacit subjective and normative claims within these data sources (Carspecken, 1996). Furthermore, this allowed us to elucidate the values, beliefs, and attitudes embedded within the participant narratives. We also analyzed the participants' purpose statements for aspects of their positionality in regards to their priorities and goals as aspiring teachers. We then developed thick cases for each participant and used cross-case analysis to identify predominate themes across the cases that are represented in this article.

Findings

The pre-service teachers' revisions (additions to and re-narrations) of the graphic novel narratives identified agency in three distinct ways (see Table 2). First, we present findings related to postionality of students prior to the graphic novel project. Second, pre-service teachers made revisions that addressed the agency of the historical actors and changed their decisions within the constraints of their given circumstances. Third, pre-service teachers made revisions to the graphic novels that changed the decisions of historical actors to better fit their own ethical framework. Fourth, pre-service teachers made revisions to the graphic novels to critique the authors' interpretations of the historical event and the amount of agency assigned to certain historical actors (Table 3).

Positionalities

There appeared to be shifts in the participants and our understandings of positionality during our project. For the pre-service teacher participants, they engaged with literature in ways that showed an increased awareness of social studies education as a vehicle for social justice. Before they read and re-narrated the novels, we asked participants to describe why they wanted to become teachers in their purpose statements. The following excerpts are representative samples from a 500-word purpose statement that participants wrote before the graphic novel project. Dara, who later chose to read *The Kite Runner*, wrote:

> As a teacher, I believe my role will be to set a good example inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers are very influential, and wherever I may be I know there will be people watching what I say and how I act. I also feel that it is my role to help and serve within my community whenever I have the opportunity. I believe that my most important role as a teacher will be to maintain respectful and appropriate relationships with my students and their parents.

Dara illustrated a common theme among pre-service teachers in writing that they want to make their communities better but are often vague about the ways they hope to accomplish this. Social injustices such as racism, sexism, or heteronormativity rarely appeared in any of the pre-graphic novel writing. Mandi, who later chose *Persepolis*, mirrored this ambiguity. She wrote, “My students will see the joy that comes from learning and progressing upon the path of education. My students will, also, come to understand that the study of history is important to the understanding of us as well as our possible future.”

Ryann, who later chose *Maus*, wrote:

> I want students to understand how our government works and I want them to know that they don't just have to live with the way things are. That is the beautiful thing about democracy. It can change. I want students to know that they can be that change…I plan to realize these goals through classroom discussion, through allowing my students to state their opinions and defend them. I think some of the most important exercises we can do in our classrooms is just to allow students a place to state their opinion and feel that it matters.

Ryann expressed a little more specificity, but she still does not mention issues of social justice. For Ryann, agency is expressed as voicing opinions and defending opinions with reason.

Marcus, who later chose to read *Gettysburg*, wrote:

> I believe the purpose of the education system is to help our young people to be able to grow up with the absolute best knowledge and opportunities available to make their lives and the world a better place. I don't believe this is limited to just textbook information taught in the classroom, but I believe equally important curriculum is that of the social skills and personal characteristics of being a good person that will help our education system excel at the highest level.

Marcus reflects another common refrain among pre-service teachers. There is often an emphasis upon individuals and 'good character' as an emphasis rather than naming socially unjust structures such as institutionalized racism or sexism. This emphasis on character works to approach issues such as racism as flaws in individual character rather than flaws in society.

Brody, who later chose to read *The United States Constitution*, echoes the emphasis an on individual improvement as a rationale for education and teaching. He wrote:

> I see my future role in the classroom as helping students to think and challenge ideas. Besides just passing on important information, I think I should be helping the students to become critical thinkers so they are prepared to continue their education regardless of what or where they study next.

Patty, who later chose *New Orleans: After the Deluge*, wrote with the most specificity of all of the participants:

> Reading novels like *1984* or *Atlas Shrugged* or assigning newspaper articles dealing with highly controversial topics such as abortion, gay marriage, etc., have and will continue to incite opposition from parents. I am grateful that parents are concerned about their children's education, but I must stay true to my beliefs about education as well. I cannot be blown about by every huff and puff from a parent or principal.

She was the only participant to express with any specificity social issues that she and her students might address in the classroom. She also expressed agency as a teacher and the power structure in which she will struggle with as a teacher.

Findings related to positionality are significant in these statements. The above statements from our participants expressed the types of silence that function to legitimate Whiteness and maintain institutionalized racism. Castagno's (2008) research on these silences took place in a community within our state and very similar in demographics to where we teach. The absence of any mention of race was apparent in all the participants writing before they engaged with the graphic novels. All participants in our study are white, as are we, the authors. As white teacher educators teaching in classrooms in which it is not uncommon for every student to be white, we struggle with ways to examine our privilege. We also struggle with other forms of privilege and the silence surrounding other social injustices that serves to maintain systems of oppression such as sexism, classism, and heteronormativity. In the next section, we show findings related to the ways that students understand positionality, agency, and social injustices in relationship to the graphic novel project.

Agency of historical actors

Primarily, pre-service teachers identified agency in the historical actors' decisions, and they revised the frames of the graphic novels to more explicitly demonstrate the constraints on the historical actors' decisions. In most cases, the pre-service teachers demonstrated that the historical actors were subjects who were shaped by societal structures and their environment. They also recognized that the historical actors had the freedom to take action, and thus act differently than portrayed in the graphic novel. Yet, the pre-service teachers thought that the constraints imposed by the historical actors' society and environment would influence their actions much more than ethics, or the simple desire to "do the right thing." For example, in reading *The Kite Runner*, Dara highlighted the powerful social constraints that existed and still exist in Afghanistan. In her re-narration, she thought it would be important to emphasize Hassan's desire to console his friend, despite his dad's subtle reminder of their ethnicity and social class, and thus the socially accepted way for someone to act in that situation. Dara noted this and wrote, "I changed it so that Hassan's father tells him that this incident is none of his business. I wanted to make it clearer that Hassan wanted to run to the aid of his friend" (Reflection, p. 1). Dara wanted to more clearly depict that Hassan wanted to act differently, and ethically more appropriate, but that the constraints of societal norms restricted his agency. Dara thought that the external societal constraints related to ethnicity and social class were much more powerful influences on his actions than Hassan's own internal ethical commitment to his friend.

Most pre-service teachers in this study thought about the power of societal constraints similar to Dara. In some instances, the pre-service teachers thought that the constraints were so powerful that the historical actors were incapable of action. For example, in her reading of *Persepolis*, Mandi noted the impact of two major social constraints on the main historical actor, Marjane. The first constraint was the new Islamic government in Iran, which restricted her abilities in many ways, compared to life under the Shah. The second constraint was the ensuing war with Iraq, which evoked anxiety and fear about the ways her abilities would be limited. Mandi identified the influence of these types of historical events on common people, and wrote:

> My re-narration of the frame…actually splits the frame into two separate frames. I felt that two important ideas were being stated in one frame and that it would better show her hopelessness if that was stated in one frame by itself.

Fig. 1. Mandi's representation of social institutions constraining Marjane's agency.

> Then by adding in the very next frame that the war had begun adds to Marjane's feelings of complete loss instead of diminishing from them by putting them together in the same frame. (Mandi, Reflection, p. 2)

Mandi demonstrated her belief that societal structures and forces, such as governments and wars, are major constraints on an individual's agency, and failed to recognize the ethical possibility of acting in ways to counteract oppression and conflict (Fig. 1).

Agency as relation ethics

A small group of pre-service teachers viewed the concept of historical agency differently from their classmates, and applied their own ethical framework to their revisions. This group of pre-service teachers also understood the historical actors as subjects shaped by their society and environment; however, this group of pre-service teachers used their own ethical framework and demonstrated their belief that the historical actors could have acted differently, beyond the constraints of their historical situations. The pre-service teachers depicted the historical actors acting different from the norms of their society. They justified the historical actors' decisions through more universal ethical principles, principles that are now considered normative. For example, Ryann re-narrated a frame from *Maus* because of the discriminatory actions of Vladek, who had survived a Holocaust concentration camp. Ryann wrote in her written reflection, "With the re-narration I wanted to revisit a portion of the book that bothered me. I really hated how Vladek was so racist against the Black hitchhiker after surviving the Holocaust" (Reflection, p. 1). Ryann opposed the type of action that Vladek had taken. She thought that because of Vladek's experience in the concentration camp, and the severe discrimination that he had faced in his own life, that he should have a better understanding of discrimination and refrain from acting discriminatory towards others. While there could be many reasons behind Vladek's discriminatory actions, Ryann prioritized her own ethical framework that promoted non-discriminatory actions justified by Vladek's own experiences in a concentration camp.

Pre-service teachers also applied their ethical framework by demonstrating empathy for certain historical actors who shared their own ethical beliefs. For example, Marcus read *Gettysburg* and added frames that showed how the Civil War divided families over the issue of human rights. Marcus wrote:

> The first frames I included were frames about a father and son that were on different sides of the war and had to fight against each other. In these frames I really wanted to present the idea that there were people who struggled greatly with moral decisions about what basic human rights should be, insomuch they ended up fighting against their own family members. (Marcus, Reflection, p.1)

Marcus empathized with people such as a Southern born son, who fought for the North, and emphasized the decision to fight against his own father in order for others to be emancipated. In relation to Marcus' own ethical framework, this was the definitive agentive act related to the Civil War. Individuals would have to completely reject the long held and supported constraints of southern culture, and even family, in order to act in ethical manner.

Agency as critical interpretation

A few pre-service teachers viewed the concept of agency similar to many of their classmates, but thought that the author's interpretation of the historical event or actors was distorted. The pre-service teachers understood the historical actors as subjects shaped by their society and environment, and that the author had misrepresented the circumstances of the historical situations. The pre-service teachers thought that this misrepresentation assigned too much agency to some historical actors and too little agency to others. This identification of agency was interesting because it challenged not only the knowledge valued by the author's interpretation but also the knowledge valued by society as an edited and published

narrative. For example, Brody read *The United States Constitution: A Graphic Adaptation*, and thought that the description of the post-civil war amendments credited too much agency to the U.S. Congressmen who passed the amendments. Brody thought that the author implied that the amendments made African Americans equal citizens, when in fact it was a much longer struggle. Brody wrote:

> My other two frames were about how even with the Reconstruction Amendments, full rights were not shared by African-Americans until after the hard work of Civil Rights Activists…the only effects my new frames would have is to give a more complete picture of how events evolved. (Brody, Reflection, p. 1)

Brody understood that these amendments were major strides forward for African Americans; however, he did not believe that white congressmen should be fully credited for shaping the civil rights of African Americans today. Furthermore, he wanted to highlight the struggles of African American citizens in the Civil Rights Movement who further defined the Constitution meaning of the Civil War amendments for society. Drawing upon his own ethical perspective, Brody thought that this misrepresentation would lead readers to understate the work of African American civil rights activists, and overstate the work of white reconstruction-era U.S. Congressmen.

Different from Brody, Patty thought that the author of her graphic novel did not credit historical actors with enough agency. Patty read *A.D. New Orleans: After the Deluge* and focused on the evacuation process prior to Hurricane Katrina's landfall. In her re-narration, Patty simultaneously critiqued the author's interpretation of the decisions made by both the citizens of New Orleans and the city officials. Patty wrote:

> I wanted to emphasize the fact that much of the turmoil suffered by the people in this book could have possibly been avoided had they listened to the multiple warnings issued by leaders. This was not a casual reminder; it was more of a command. (Patty, Reader Response, p. 2)

Patty's re-narration emphasized the resolve of New Orleans citizens' decisions to stay despite imminent danger, as well as highlighting the fact that the city officials made repeated warnings. The evacuation of the city was a pivotal point during Hurricane Katrina, and Patty thought that the agency of both the citizens and the city officials was underrepresented in the author's interpretation. From Patty's ethical perspective, this underrepresentation could possibly lead readers to be unnecessarily critical of the New Orleans city officials' agency, and uninformed of the New Orleans citizens' degree of resolve (Fig. 2).

Discussion

The three ways in which the pre-service teachers identified agency also related to the participant relationships that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identified. First, through their revisions, nearly all of the pre-service teachers identified agency that was between the *represented participants*–the historical actors–in the graphic novels. Second, a small number of pre-service teachers identified agency by using their ethical framework and judgment in their revisions. As *interactive participants*, the pre-service teachers' demonstrated their attitudes toward the *represented participants* (the historical actors), and added to or re-narrated frames to better fit their own ethical framework and a shifting sense of positionality. The pre-service teachers were engaged in understanding history, positionality, and their agency in terms of social justice. This opened the possibility of understanding a Foucauldian sense of ethics by creating more possibilities for agency and subjectivity than exists in traditional, third person narratives. Finally, a few pre-service teachers identified agency by critically analyzing the authors' interpretations of the historical events and actors. This represented a relationship between the two *interactive participants*–the author and the reader. The pre-service teachers added to and re-narrated their graphic novels to critique the portrayal of the historical actions, and the societal value that is assigned to these actions by the authors.

We had anticipated that many pre-service teachers would predominately identify agency between the represented participants. This is because we believe that the strength of graphic novels is in their narrative portrayal of the interactions among historical actors and the manner in which they highlight the historical actors' positionalities in complex historical situations. The actors' positionalities created opportunities and constraints for their agency. Rather than a decontextualized subject, their identities were unique and operated within structures such as institutionalized racism and sexism. The contextualized subject helped students understand the relationship between human agency and their societal structures.

While we consider this sort of engagement with graphic novels as a good step in the development of pre-service teachers' historical thinking skills, we are also concerned that a majority of pre-service teachers did not consider adding or re-narrating frames that demonstrated the historical actors ability to act and make decisions outside of the economic, political, and societal constraints of their historical situation. The pre-service teachers demonstrated their understanding that alternative choices were possible in the historical actors' decision-making; however, those decisions were limited by, and insignificant in comparison to, the economic, political, and societal structures. The 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.

Prior to the graphic novel activity, the statements by the pre-service teachers indicated a lack of detail concerning the role of teachers and positionalities as they are embedded in larger structures of institutionalized racism and sexism. As researchers, our aim was to see the influences of graphic novels in creating an awareness of identities within the novels

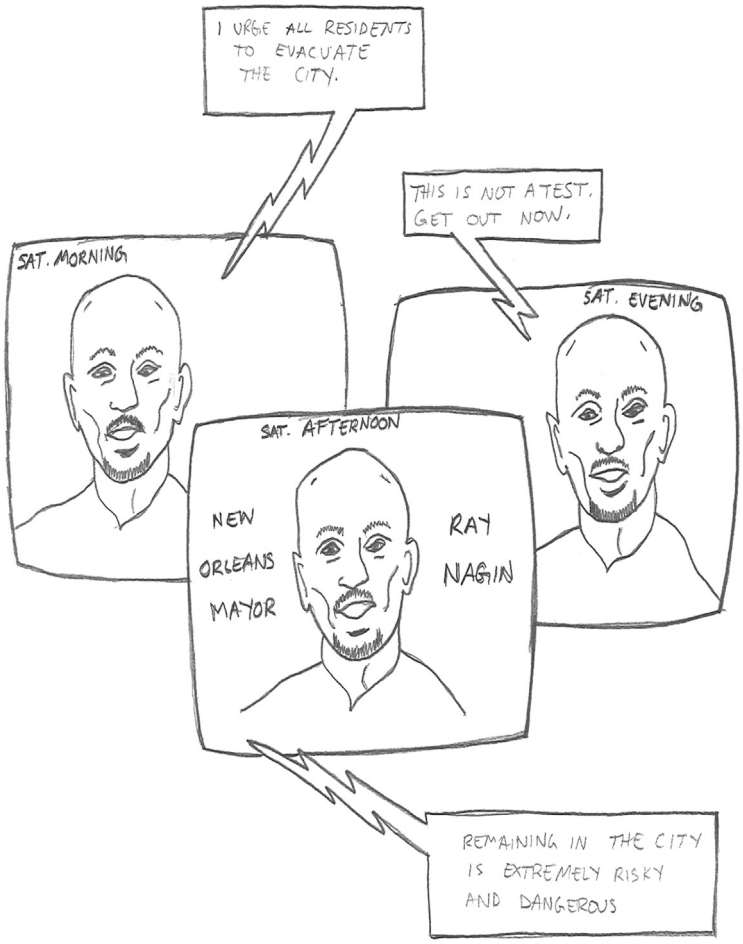

Fig. 2. Patty's critique of the authors portrayal of individuals agency.

but also the identities of researchers and participants. The relative silences related to racism and sexism illustrated the positionalities of the participants and researchers as white and embedded in a school and community that is predominantly white.

The pre-service teachers who identified agency and used their ethical framework to demonstrate their attitude toward the historical actors, added and re-narrated frames that went beyond the relationships between the represented historical actors. This group of pre-service teachers placed themselves in the narratives and thought about how they would act in the given historical situations. In some cases, they even empathized with the historical actors. Since this group of pre-service teachers drew upon their own ethical framework, they were able to consider the historical actors' ability to act and make decisions beyond the economic, political, and societal constraints of their historical situations and institutionalized structures. While the pre-service teachers' considerations may have overlooked social trends common at the time of the historical situation (such as racism in Ryann's example), as a whole, they appealed to universal ethical principles that existed at the time and could have been used to justify the historical actors' decisions. This is a valuable outcome for future history and social studies teachers because we hope that they understand, and help their students understand, that individuals in history had choices. The historical actors' ability to makes choices is the link between ethics and agency (Barton, 2011; Sexias, 1993). As Barton (2011) noted, "We can praise people for actions we deem good, or blame them for those we condemn, only if they were free to act" (p. 8). This group of pre-service teachers recognized the historical actors' ability to choose, and despite common trends at the time, realized that these historical actors could have made different decisions justified by an ethical framework similar to their own.

The pre-service teachers who identified agency and critically analyzed the authors' interpretations of the historical events, added and re-narrated frames to critique the portrayal of the historical actors' decisions. This group of pre-service teachers was also able to consider the historical actors' ability to act and make decisions beyond the economic, political, and societal structures of their historical situation; however, they went further with their analysis and critiqued the value assigned to historical actions. By value, we mean that the pre-service teachers assessed the importance of certain acts over others in the author's interpretation of a historical event. The pre-service teachers thought that the acts of certain historical actors had been

misrepresented by the narrative, either through omission or overstatement. The problem of misrepresenting agency is common in history textbooks because the texts assign agency to non-human sources (Barton, 2011), and sometimes even omit agents altogether through passive voice (Damico et al., 2008), to ultimately misrepresent the historical event. We interpreted this group of pre-service teachers as using Foucualdian ethics to critically analyze an author's interpretation and consider the various societal factors that contributed to an individual's agency, as well as new possibilities not constrained by these factors. This critical analysis led to a new understanding of the historical actor's agency, and ultimately reevaluated their decisions and actions in the contexts of history and social justice. This type of analysis is invaluable to future history and social studies teachers because "Ignoring, misrepresenting, or oversimplifying historical agency can have disastrous consequences for our ability to think about our lives in the present" (Barton, 2011, p. 10).

Implications

Our study offers new possibilities in the area of instructional methodologies. The use of graphic novels helped pre-service teachers develop a better understanding of agency, especially historical agency. The effectiveness of this activity–reading graphic novels, adding frames, re-narrating frames, and reflecting – was not only evident in the pre-service teachers' work, but it was also evident in the fruitful discussion that took place in the next class period. The discussion went beyond simply considering the frames that the pre-service teachers created, and their own agency in creating them. As a whole class, we engaged in more complex discussions about what actions count as agency, or how much agency people actually had in certain historical situations? While some pre-service teachers were more critical than others in their revisions, this discussion of such complex questions helped all students reflect on their revisions and think more critically about the historical events, actors, and interpretations.

The pre-service teachers' revisions represented varying degrees of critical thinking, but at the very minimum, this activity allowed each of them to identify and make judgments about the historical actors' capabilities and constraints in their historical events and situations. Graphic novels provide a format that allows the students to clearly identify these elements that constitute agency. Furthermore, the narrative aspect of the graphic novel provided the pre-service teachers with details that contributed to the judgments they made about the historical actors in their historical events and situations. In one way, graphic novels provide a clearer portrayal of historical actors' positionalities than other historical texts, especially when the historical actors face external pressures within societal structures. This clear portrayal of positionality allows for readers, such as our pre-service teachers, to make critical and ethical judgments about actions and decisions of historical actors and institutions. This indicates a complex understanding of how social inequalities constrain agents but also how these constraints can be overcome by imagining and working toward new understandings of how to make institutions, structures, and communities more just. There were many silences related to whiteness, and we did not examine these silences in enough depth. In our future work, we plan to build upon this study and develop deeper understandings related to institutionalized racism and social injustices related to gender and queer identities.

While we used graphic novels to examine relational categories described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), we see great potential for focusing upon these relational categories as students interact with multiple modes of media and representation. For example, future research could examine how to use these relational categories to frame how students understand historical agency and societal structure in film, photography, and other graphic art forms.

We believe that understanding the concept of agency is vital in critically engaging with any historical text in social studies. For students to understand the complex relationships between historical actors, institutions, and societal structures, they must start with a clear understanding of agency. This becomes increasingly important in educating future social studies teachers in historical inquiry and learning. In their future role as history and social studies teachers, we hope our students will not distort, passivize, or attribute agency to non-human sources and will instead focus on the complex relationships among actors, institutions, and society.

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