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Imagination and Interpretation: An Empirical Study of Graphic Novels in the High School Social Studies Classroom

Nina K. Hoey

Nina Hoey was born and raised in Taunton, MA and currently lives in Worcester, MA where she is a graduate student at Clark and a teaching intern at South High Community School. After graduating with Phi Beta Kappa honors from Clark in 2014 with a B.A. in History and a minor in Music, she began pursuing her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher. The diverse group of high school students in her three U.S. History classes inspired her research on the use of graphic novels in Social Studies classrooms to inspire creativity, teach visual literacy, and practice historical thinking skills with today's modern learnings. *Imagination and Interpretation* is Nina's first publication and she is thrilled to be a part of Clark's SURJ.

**Abstract**

High school students today acquire information in ways that are not always valued in schools. They often seek visual or multimedia alternatives to traditional written texts. Information acquisition is one click away, yet young people struggle to interpret and critique the vast array of sources from which they are receiving information. Furthermore, in this digital age, young people have more opportunities than ever to publicly compose critiques and interpretations of the visual images they consume. They also have more opportunities to access forums that allow them to produce and present imaginative media of their own. High school students are eager to practice these skills, but teachers often struggle to weave them into the curriculum. Throughout this past academic school year I have been exploring ways to meet this challenge. Drawing on experiences in my high school social studies classroom, I evaluate the effectiveness of using the images in graphic novels to teach social studies to a group of thirty-three eleventh-graders. My research involves an empirical study of a World War I unit I completed with my students. After learning about World War I through an assortment of primary and secondary sources, students completed an end of unit assessment that required them to engage with Joe Sacco's graphic novel, *The Great War*, in a variety of ways. Using Sacco's highly detailed illustrations of the Battle of the Somme, students made predictions, investigated the author's methods and sources, critiqued, interpreted, and corroborated the work. Additionally, they created their own written narratives and graphic representations of this battle. I conclude that graphic novels can be an effective resource in the modern social studies classroom. Graphic novels can be used to validate students’ background knowledge and experience with new media, teach visual literacy, and require students to practice sophisticated historical thinking skills.

**Introduction**

In any era, students’ experiences are shaped by the cultural norms, values, and practices of the world where they live. Today, the contemporary classroom, teacher, and student have access to unprecedented academic resources and information due to the major digital media innovations of the twenty-first century. This access has changed both the space and the student. Teachers struggle to remake their classrooms into spaces with modern resources and pedagogies that support and maximize student engagement in a digital age. Students find difficulty in trying to derive meaning and relevance from traditional texts and traditionally valued academic skills that put a premium on information acquisition.

Traditional social studies classrooms often teach students how to find information in a written passage and memorize it and finally record it in writing. According to Nichole Pinkard (2011), founder of Chicago’s Digital Youth Network, “Literacy has always been defined by the technology. Before the printing press, your ability to orally recite something meant to be literate, so as
technology has made things cheaper, we are now saying is someone literate if they cannot critique media, take media in, if they are only taking in traditional texts.” This approach conflicts with their everyday multimedia experience that empowers them to not only gather and absorb more information than ever, but challenges them to critique the source and even become the source. Social media, blogs, and other avenues provide boundless space for students to critique contemporary information sources and generate their art, ideas, and information for others to see and critique.

This tension between valuing the traditional while accommodating the modern is an age-old conflict. Incorporating the graphic novel into the curriculum is one constructive strategy that classroom teachers can use to reconcile this. The current literature on this topic explores the scope of graphic novels and the variety of ways they could be used in the modern classroom to support student engagement. This research also asserts the need for more empirical research from which it can measure the true effectiveness of using graphic novels in the classroom. Specifically, this paper explores the value of using graphic novels to support learning in the secondary Social Studies. I concluded a World War I unit with an in-depth “reading” and analysis of Joe Sacco’s illustrated panorama, The Great War. This work depicts the most infamous battle of World War I, the Battle of the Somme, in a 24-foot long panorama filled with detailed illustrations that portray the physical and psychological trauma of war. Students engaged with this work in a variety of ways in order to both learn about World War I and practice historical thinking skills such as contextualization, sourcing, and corroboration. I share the parameters of this project, samples of the student work that shaped my conclusions, and finally, the implications of this type of work for future social studies classrooms and curricula.

**Literature Review**

Graphic novels have been an object of useful research and analysis that can provide classroom teachers with the necessary information to tailor these innovative resources to students’ needs. The literature suggests that graphic novels can engage modern, digital learners by activating and validating the visual literacies with which they are equipped. Butcher and Manning (2004) argue that “contemporary young adults look for print media that contain the same visual impact and pared-down writing style and contribute to their enthusiasm for visual rather than written literacy” (67). Cromer and Clark (2007) consider the ways in which the “multilayered, nonlinear structure” (589) of the graphic novel is similar to the ways in which young people prefer to consume information.

Graphic novels have the visual flash and familiarity to engage young students in social studies. Beyond student engagement, however, the literature proposes that graphic novels can be used to support and practice disciplinary historical thinking skills such as contextualization, corroboration, and sourcing. Boerman-Cornell (2011) discusses the ways in which graphic novels can teach these skills. Students practice contextualization with graphic novels by assessing “quick, social, economic, and cultural context through their depictions of clothing, buildings, transportation, and interpersonal interactions during different periods in history” (4). This is especially necessary for Joe Sacco’s The Great War because there is no text to support the images. Students must rely on visual details to contextualize. They must have a finely tuned understanding of time and place if they are to make meaning of an interpretation of history which “juxtaposes similar moments from several different events separated by time” (4).

According to Boerman-Cornell (2011), students must also practice sourcing and corroboration. After investigating the sources the author used to create his graphic novel, students can corroborate it by comparing its interpretation of historical events to that of other primary and secondary sources. In these ways, graphic novels can be tailored not just to academic purpose, but specifically to the social studies curriculum. In fact, Frey and Noys (2002) call the graphic novel a “site where ‘history’ itself or representations of history, are put into play: interrogated, challenged, and even undermined” (258). They call it a “testing place to probe the limits of history and historiography” (259). Finally, research suggests that graphic novels can have pedagogical implications for the practice of differentiating instruction, particularly for English Language Learners. Boerman-Cornell (2011) argues that while teachers should not abandon traditional written forms in the classroom, the graphic novel can be “another tool in differentiating reading instruction” (6). Cromer and Clark (2007) agree: “Because the written text is so limited in graphic novels, students can access it more easily than they can in more extensive accounts” (586).
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Methods

Because convincing research attests to the efficacy of the graphic novel in the social studies classroom, I chose to implement it in my own classroom. My United States History II class has thirty-three eleventh graders with diverse backgrounds and learning styles, a range of comfort levels with traditional written texts, and English Language Learners who appreciate and benefit from visual supports. I chose Joe Sacco’s The Great War because it is visually striking, and I predicted it would appeal to my students. Upon research of the work, I became convinced of its historical accuracy, but also intrigued by Sacco’s research experience. Sacco visited the photo archives at the Imperial War Museum in London; the photographs he found there inspired him to create the highly detailed, realistic illustrations for The Great War. Sacco (2013) described what it was like to draw these images:

“I wanted to sort of view it as if you’re looking at the world from above, somehow removed and you’re just observing what’s going on without being told what’s going on. This allowed me to just sort of think things through myself or experience different things at different times as I was drawing, and you begin to think of what an amazing human endeavor war is.”

I wanted to create a project that would allow students to engage with the highly metacognitive, thoughtful, complex visual experience of reading The Great War. I modeled the parameters of my project after Cromer and Clark’s suggestions with some modifications. Cromer and Clark (2007) suggest beginning with a series of questions about some historical events with which students are familiar and then using a graphic novel account of those events to construct written narratives based on the graphic novel. I instructed my students to examine the panels of Joe Sacco’s work and comment on the details they noticed according to the research we had conducted on World War I thus far. Students were asked to cite specific historical vocabulary such as “trench warfare” and “No-Man’s Land” when appropriate. Next, students were given Joe Sacco’s panel summaries and Author’s Note. They were asked to construct creatively written narratives that depicted the scenes in the panels they were assigned. Because there is no text in Sacco’s work, students were tasked with providing a narrative to support his visuals. Their narratives were dependent on the visuals that encouraged them to “marry print and visual representations in order to read in ways that are deeply meaningful” (Cromer & Clark, 2007, 589). I wanted students to consider deeply the significance of Sacco’s choice to depict the World War I experience as an illustrative work with no text. Sacco (2013) himself expressed how meaningful it was for him to approach this work as an artist. He said, “it’s the first time I’ve really allowed myself that. Maybe it’s freed something up in me.” I asked students to ponder the relationship between their narratives and Sacco’s illustrations in writing. I asked them the following questions:

*Why do you think Joe Sacco chose to depict the World War I experience in an illustrated panorama with no textual explanations?*

*Do you think The Great War is an effective source? Does it thoroughly and accurately provide readers with information about The Battle of the Somme? Is it an interesting way to learn about World War I?*

In the Author’s Note, Joe Sacco said, “Making this illustration wordless made it impossible to provide context or add explanations. I had no means of indicating the high command or lauding the sacrifice of the soldiers. It was a relief not to do these things. All I could do was show what happened between the general and the grave and hope that even after a hundred years the bad taste had not been washed from our mouths.” What does he mean? Was there anything lost when we added text to the graphic novel?

Cromer and Clark’s next step is to allow students to compare their narratives. My students created posters that connected the panels from The Great War with their original narratives. Then, students had to present to the class, which encouraged cooperative learning. The final step in Cromer and Clark’s (2007) suggested lesson is to have students “draw conclusions about historiography and historical accounts based on their creation and reading of the various narratives” (587). I achieved this with a sourcing and corroboration reflection students completed individually in writing. Finally, students shared their responses in a whole-class discussion. Students were asked the following questions:

*What was it like to make historical predictions based on detailed images?*

*Do you think The Great War was more effective once you added text to accompany it? Why or why not?*

*What kinds of sources did Joe Sacco use to create his novel? Did he use reliable sources?*
What are the pros and cons of using graphic novels to learn about history?

Findings

Upon completion of this project, I came to four conclusions, each of which I will support with student work:

1. Graphic novels are often successful at engaging today's learners and encouraging artistry and creativity in their work.

When students were working on these narratives and their artistic posters, I noticed they were activating disciplinary language in a more authentic way than they had previously. While students had demonstrated their understanding of modern warfare in writing, this was the first time I heard students using words like “heavy artillery” and “trench warfare” so freely in class discussion. I had delivered a mini-lesson on the characteristics of modern warfare and students had demonstrated their knowledge in writing, but this was the first time I heard students using words like “heavy artillery” and “trench warfare” so freely in conversation. The visual component of Joe Sacco’s work deepened their understanding of the material. Students seemed mesmerized by the artistic details; they noticed things that even I had missed.

It was clear to me that the visual nature of the graphic novel was engaging to my students in a way that text is often not. The Great War kept my students attentive to a complex subject and resulted in some of the most profound personal engagement I have seen them achieve. The visuals clearly allowed students to empathize with the human experience of war and express that empathy in a creative way. Students demonstrated an ability to control content vocabulary and incorporate it into a narrative and more importantly, they revealed a deep personal engagement with the material. Many students’ narratives demonstrated a keen attention to detail. They were specific about what soldiers were wearing and what types of equipment they were carrying. Students carefully explained the timeline of the battle, informing readers when the cavalry was called, when the cannons were fired, and when the soldiers retreated to the crowded trenches. These narratives were characterized by their ability to verbally interpret specific details from the images more freely.

Other narratives were broader, interpretative, and emotionally driven. These students focused on the facial expressions of the soldiers or the violence and pain they experienced. Their narratives expressed feelings of emptiness, fear, and desperation. Sacco refrains from communicating the soldiers’ emotions in writing; as a result, my students, through careful and critical observation, were able to connect to and empathize with the soldiers in the pictures.

One group of students chose to create a short comic based on Sacco’s graphic novel. The comic portrayed soldiers casually discussing what they ate for lunch or what their wives back home were like, as they gathered equipment and prepared for battle. The last panel of the comic depicts a cameraman snapping a photo of a few soldiers and reads “Smile for the camera guys! It’s
going to look good back at home!”
A similar scene appears in Joe Sacco’s novel, but it is brief and easy to disregard as an insignificant detail. With the critical eye of a historian, my students narrowed in on a detail they thought was important and gave it new purpose. Their comic effectively communicated the relationship between the soldiers’ identities and how the home front perceived them.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 1:
POSTER AND CREATIVE NARRATIVE
“The air was filled with gunfire and explosions, each sound making the soldiers jump. Sat in the trenches more than 100 soldiers milled about searching for the breakfast that had just arrived. Others mourned the loss of fellow soldiers and friends, many of whom had never experienced war before. With them, each soldier carried 60 pounds of equipment along with the other heavy burdens they carried.

Both sides of the battlefield was filled with barbed wire, in hopes that they’d slow down the rapidly advancing attackers. News had just arrived from the other side; large underground mines had been fixed underneath the German position. We replaced our gunpowder and fired our bayonets, preparing to enter the battlefield. The explosions came to a halt just in time for sunrise. The soldiers climb out of the trenches through the various gaps to stable land with an empty view; everything covered in holes and no Germans in sight, all ready to keep moving forward.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 2:
POSTER AND CREATIVE NARRATIVE
“We are dying. These are trenches so deep I think they lead to hell. The fiery poison that stings my eyes makes me believe I’m actually there. No one will let me leave this hell – people higher up are receiving orders to keep us put. To keep us in their well-oiled killing machine. I try to help my fellow soldiers and take them to relieve their wounds, but it’s too difficult with all of the artillery coming at us. I can feel the pain rushing to spread through the rest of my limbs until the fire becomes so unbearable that they go numb. I see my friends, my fellow soldiers, whom in which I was laughing with a few months ago, on stretchers, unconscious, some dead. At least they’re not here. “Get down!” a nurse yells as I feel the heat from the bombs that we dreaded. They’re firing at us. The Enemy. The British.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 3:
POSTER AND CREATIVE NARRATIVE
“Promptly at 7AM, men labored to prepare for their attack on the Germany. They armed their artillery forces and geared their cavalry. Using cannons, the troops bombard loud echoes that can be heard in England. As night began to fall, anxious soldiers headed towards the trenches – where many explosions and warfare were seen whereas the cavalry unit moves to the front line. Due to heavy rain that downpoured for two days, the Allies postponed their offensive, leaving the men that were supposed to fight first waiting in forward attack positions. Trenches are unbearably crowded, many men spent days on their feet. They waited while holding heavy armories and in a unified formation.”
STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 4: COMIC INSPIRED BY SACCO
Panel 1: “C’mon men, to the front lines”
Panel 2: “Yes sir, you heard the general.”
Panel 3: “On my way to the front lines general!”
Panel 4: “I’m trying! We have to prepare this quickly!”
Panel 5: “How’s your wife?” “She’s good.”
Panel 6: “Fill yourself up.” “Almost done.” “Just a second!”
Panel 7: “Hopefully the paratroopers fall down so the war will end!” “Fire!”
Panel 8: “Let’s try to move this quickly!”
Panel 9/10: “Smile for the camera guys! It’s going to look good back at home!”

2. Graphic novels are an effective means of getting students to practice historical thinking skills such as sourcing and corroboration as they evaluate the value of the work as a secondary source to learn about World War I.

Corroboration is one of the most difficult and complex skills for high school history students to master. It requires them not only to understand and analyze two sources, but to connect and compare them in meaningful ways to each other and the broader research inquiry. I had assessed students’ corroboration skills with primary source documents prior to this project, and it was clear that they needed more support and scaffolding. I decided to use the graphic novels to practice corroboration. Students would look at the detailed illustrations and write a summary of their inferences. They were required to comment on the specific details from the illustrations that led them to their predictions. After they had finished their predictions, they were given the textual explanations from Sacco’s notes. They were asked to corroborate their historical interpretations based on the visuals with Sacco’s textual explanation.

I found that students were much more comfortable corroborating image-to-text than they had been corroborating text-to-text. While their observations were often concrete, they demonstrated a keen attention to detail and an ability to notice discrepancies, two skills that are vital to corroboration in history. Furthermore, this part of the project provided access to English Language Learners, allowing them to demonstrate their understanding of the material. In fact, they wrote more about what they observed in the illustrations than they ever had in previous writing assignments.

The prediction and follow-up corroboration required students to be metacognitive. Some students noticed that their predictions were close but focused on the wrong details. Others noticed that their predictions only accounted for part of the story and recognized the need for a supplemental text to complete their understanding. One student used his experiences as a member of JROTC to compose a highly detailed and accurate prediction; his corroboration allowed him to reflect on the ways in which his background knowledge and experience with military discourse shaped his predictions. Like historians, my students were using one source, Sacco’s visuals, to generate an informed prediction about a historical event and consulting a second source (written description) to corroborate the first. Finally, by considering the connections and contradictions present in the two sources, students were able to draw conclusions about what happened in the Battle of the Somme.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 5: PREDICTION (a)
AND CORROBARATION (b)
a. “In 3 picture it shows the daily life of a thousand men. Behind the No man zone with them like a house, a family. Each of them have their own position, and their face not show they’re in the war. They clothing, cooking, and sleeping like they did at home. Each man is carrying the shovel to dig the
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STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 6:
PREDICTION (a)
AND CORROBORATION (b)

a. “In the first image, the house seems to be guarded by who seems to be a commanding officer. Also the cavalry fleet is leaving the scene. The house could belong to the commander. In the second picture, the cavalry and infantry men seem to be operating a mission and overtaking the city. It’s as if they’re taking over the streets and asserting their power. The last picture looks like the regiment is abandoning the base for a long period of time. I’m assuming this because the horses are being fed and the trucks and trains are loading up.”

b. “My prediction was pretty close to what actually happened. However, I didn’t realize that the soldiers were waiting to attack the soldiers of the other side.”

Next, I handed out copies of the Author’s Note, which confused many students at first. Many of them said things such as, “Who reads the Author’s Note, Miss?!” I hoped that the sourcing reflection would reveal to them the significance of a historian’s sources and give them practice investigating perspective and accuracy of historical information. I found that many students struggled to articulate why they trusted a source. This is a disciplinary skill we will continue to practice throughout the year.

I did find that students were beginning to use some of the languaging that real historians use when they consider sourcing. They used words like “reliable,” “accuracy,” and “perspective.” Many students trusted Sacco’s graphic novel because he used thousands of images from the Imperial War Museum Photo Archives in London to inform his graphics. Students appeared to connect the quantity of sources a historian uses to the accuracy of his work. One student argued that the graphic novel was a limited source because it only portrays the British perspective. Other students struggled to articulate their critiques.

Despite varied levels of success in articulating their critiques, all of my students understood that a historian should consult multiple sources and consider multiple perspectives when attempting to understand a historical event or idea. Furthermore, though students did not attempt to research Sacco’s sources or methods any further than his Author’s Note, this activity required them to practice the skill of navigating through a historian’s research and identifying the sources of his information. Future projects might insist that students dig even deeper. Practicing the detective work of a historian has implications for their futures as history students and as young citizens in contemporary society.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 8:
SOURCING REFLECTION

“I believe that Sacco used reliable sources as he states where he got his information from. Thus leading to trust the accuracy of the graphic novel. Because of the numerous perspectives sources that he implemented.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 9:
SOURCING REFLECTION

“Imperial War Museum Photo Archives in London. Thousands of images. World War One historians. I trust these and believe they’re accurate because they’re specific sources.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 10:
SOURCING REFLECTION

“His resources are reliable, he used information from historians of WWI in London to answer visual questions. He also read First Day in Somme by Martin Middlebrooks, Somme by Lyn
MacDonald and various other books. I do trust that the novel depicts his perception of the war but it is limited in the perspective of the eyes of the English.”

3. Graphic novels are an effective means of differentiating instruction and supporting English Language Learners and all students in history.

All classrooms are diverse communities where students bring a range of experiences, discourses, and learning styles. This is especially true in the urban classroom; urban teachers often struggle to find ways to provide engagement and maintain academic rigor in the service of equity. The history discipline is often defined by dense primary and secondary source texts that can be difficult to access, particularly for the English Language Learner. While we must not abandon primary source texts in the history classroom, we should find ways to incorporate other types of sources. Perhaps they can provide new points of entry for English Language Learners or students who struggle to master traditional academic discourses. My students’ work and feedback reflected the graphic novel’s success in accomplishing this. ELLs, who are typically reluctant to express their ideas in writing or class discussion wrote and participated verbally more than they ever had before. One ELL expressed his love of comic books and graphic novels; he said that the images clarified his understanding of World War I. Another ELL said that he enjoyed working with the graphic novel because there was no language barrier preventing him from entering the discussion.

Furthermore, what worked for the English Language Learners also worked for all of my students, who were relieved to access history in a new, fresh way. Many students said that they appreciated the break from dense texts. Others expressed that they had never used graphic novels in history class before, so they were excited to try something new. This feedback is vital to my practice; one great way to ensure student engagement is to ask students how they like to learn best. Ultimately, my goal as a history teacher is to provide engaging and comprehensive instruction in history to all of my students. I am open to any resource that can facilitate my success in achieving that goal, and I believe the graphic novel is one of those resources.

**STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 11:**
**FEEDBACK**
“I think this is one of good way to learn WWI, with me I like comic book, and I think picture help me understand more and clearer.”

**STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 12:**
**FEEDBACK**
“One pro of the graphic novel is no language barrier.”

**STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 13:**
**FEEDBACK**
“It is an interesting way to learn about WWI instead of extensive reading.”

4. Graphic novels support students’ visual literacy by requiring them to develop informed, critical stances on the visual symbols that represent the history they are studying. This is a skill that has real-life implications.

As predicted, the visual component of the graphic novel allowed students to practice contextualization in a way that supports visual literacy. Students were required to make sophisticated predictions based solely on detailed images. They had to make sense of time and place in order to make meaningful connections between the illustrations and their background knowledge of World War I. As students navigate a highly visual world, it is vital that can place the images they consume within their appropriate contexts. Sacco’s graphic novel created a space where students could practice these skills.

For example, when students were creating their narratives and artwork, they often cited details that helped them understand the time, place, and perspective of the soldiers in the images. They discussed what the buildings looked like, what kind of uniforms the soldiers wore, and how old-fashioned the camera looked. Students were using Sacco’s detailed images to situate their understanding of World War I in a real time and place, which looks much different from their worlds today. Many of them expressed that the visuals made it much easier to understand the war. Students were activating their visual literacy skills to answer questions such as “What was life like for the people in this picture?” and “What did these people value?” As students navigate their visual worlds, they must ask similar questions. Students can use the same visual literacy skills to both understand the past and critique the present.

**STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 14:**
**VISUAL CONTEXTUALIZATION**
“The graphics allow creativity and maybe even more insight. It allows to see the time frame better with the everyday things, ex. Buildings, clothes, etc.”
These students wanted to generate their ideas from a broader, more interpretative visual source, rather than receive a clear description of what happened in writing. “Everyone sees things differently,” one student said. Some students exposed the limitations of visual sources, arguing that images allow for a greater range of interpretations, which can convolute the intended meaning. This is a worthwhile critique that students should apply to the visual information sources to which they are often exposed.

My students’ success with this challenging work proves their awareness of the multiple meanings and interpretations implicated in the media they consume. It also proves that students are more trusting of and willing to engage with visual sources. Students use visual media frequently, and they are at least superficially aware of its implicit ambiguities. Using graphic novels in the social studies classroom can give students a controlled visual literacy with which they can critique their visual worlds.

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 16: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Someone may get the wrong idea and there can be too many interpretations of the image. It can be difficult and confusing to interpret. Sometimes hard to know where to start as in where to look, especially if there isn’t an obvious focus in the image.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 17: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Images are subjective so a number of different interpretations could be seen and blocking the view with bias.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 18: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“I suppose there would be some loss of imagination, but I like accuracy to get insight from history. Then I would use the accuracy to predict and imagine further.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 19: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Once someone puts their opinions of the picture into words, it becomes harder for someone else to feel something new on their own.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 20: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Adding text with The Great War is effective in the aspect that it summarizes the main points that the image is trying to convey. Rather than leaving it up to the reader to figure out what is happening. Yet at the same time, it could also not be effective. Due to the potential biased views of the ones who wrote the text as everyone sees things differently.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 21: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Many times leaving a painting or a drawing can be like leaving historical events for open interpretation. Many of us need texts to explain events that, according to evidence from text, happened in the past. We may be interpreting something that did not happen with our misunderstandings without supporting text.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 22: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“I feel a little lost on looking at the image without a caption at least.”
STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 23: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“The cons of using a graphic novel to learn about history is that if you don’t know an aspect of the piece, you can mistake it to your own comprehension and not know the real meaning behind it, which can be tricky because you need to know the background behind a picture to truly understand the meaning of it.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 24: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“It doesn’t promise as much bias as a written source and allows for interpretation.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 25: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“He illustrated the experience without textual explanations because putting in explanations wouldn’t show enough of how much the soldiers sacrificed for their country. The author says “I had no means of indicting the high command or lauding the sacrifice of the soldiers.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 26: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“I feel as if [Sacco] wanted to have a person’s imagine run with all the possibilities that could’ve happen.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 27: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“I think Joe Sacco chose to depict the WWI experience in an illustrated panorama with no textual explanations because the viewer can use their imaginations to explain what is happening. He chose to depict it with panorama to show how busy and extensive the war was during these particular moments.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 28: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“It gives the viewer a visual idea of how and what happened, but no explanations so the viewer can never be certain.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 29: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“It was fun but difficult because there was so many options that you could’ve predicted. It offered my mind to wander.”

STUDENT WORK SAMPLE 30: REPRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND VISUAL LITERACY
“Adding text would take away the amount of power just the image held. Using text allows for more specificity.”

Conclusion
My analysis of student work and feedback demonstrates that graphic novels can successfully provide visual learners, English Language Learners, and all students with access to challenging content and historical thinking skills. First, I found that students used the graphic novel to inspire their own creative, artistic representations of history. While each poster and narrative was unique, they all demonstrated care, attention to detail, creativity, and personal engagement with both the history of World War I and Joe Sacco’s graphic novel.

Beyond its appeal as an accessible, visual alternative to written texts, the graphic novel is also a useful tool for practicing historical thinking skills such as sourcing and corroboration. This conclusion was supported by student work; with varied levels of success, students grappled with issues of historiography and historical accuracy, doing the work of real historians. Student work demonstrated their ability to reach beyond passive acceptance of an absolute, narrow narrative of history and achieve some level of interaction and even intervention in the historical narrative. I believe it is valuable and necessary to trust high school students with the work of historians.

After analyzing student work and feedback, I also concluded that graphic novels are an effective means of differentiating instruction. In a class of thirty-four students, all of whom have different interests, learning styles, and abilities, it is critical that I find creative ways to support and challenge them all. This project utilized a range of skills and honed a range of learning styles. Student feedback demonstrated an appreciation of the visual source as an alternative or supplement to the texts with which we normally work. The English Language Learners in the class were particularly appreciative. I found that they participated more than ever before, even in whole-class discussions, which tend to be more intimidating for these students. That the English Language Learners were confident enough in the material to participate in class discussion demonstrated the graphic novel’s success in providing them with access to the content.

My conclusion considers the real-life implications of this lesson for high school students. I found that the graphic novel was a vessel through which students could sharpen their critical thinking about the sea of visual stimuli with which they are faced every day. The student work samples provided demonstrate attempts at interpreting the histori-
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cal narrative portrayed in the graphic novel, critiquing the way history was represented, and developing an informed decision about which information and sources to trust. Practicing these visual literacy skills are beneficial to students, not only in their history classrooms, but in their worlds.

I believe this ambitious project was successful but could benefit from a few adaptations. With future classes, I would require students to do more research on Sacco’s sources. They practiced sourcing by analyzing the Author’s Note, but I believe their analyses were limited because they did not interact with his sources. I also might expand the corroborating piece of the lesson to include other types of sources so that students would have more grounds for comparison. Finally, I might add a final assessment that more effectively synthesizes all of the content and skills utilized in the lesson. This assessment might require students to write a review of the graphic novel.

When I listen to my students, I hear that they are modern, visual learners who consume media in a variety of ways. I hear that they need practice critiquing it and they are eager to find forums to produce it. Finding ways to incorporate modern, non-traditional sources such as graphic novels into the social studies curriculum is one way I validate my students’ needs. Beyond validation, graphic novels teach visual literacy by using a graphic novel as a means of studying history. Students are practicing the visual literacy skills that are necessary to navigate today’s digital world. By evaluating the graphic novel as a secondary source in history, students are learning to discern, among many details, what is important and what information is trustworthy. By generating their own creative historical narratives, they are using graphic novels as a means of critical consumption, but also production. After all, it is their interpretation of the past and present that will generate the future.

References:


