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RUNNING HEAD: A NEW LAB FOR STUDENT FIELD RESEARCH

A new laboratory for the classroom: The graphic novel as a research field for students

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A new laboratory for the classroom: The graphic novel as a research field for students

In the fall of 2009, the author was fortunate to have a guest speaker present a lecture to his secondary social studies methods course. The speaker was Dr. Raymond Diamond, the Jules F. & Frances L. Landry Distinguished Professor at the Paul M. Herbert Law Center at Louisiana State University. When the presentation was arranged, Dr. Diamond shared a brief menu of topics with which he could share with the students. The topic that stuck out, was the use of graphica in the classroom. Using graphica, defined as comics, graphic novels, and cartoons, is a major movement of literacy education today (Sloan, 2009). Dr. Diamond presentation provoked a multitude of thought amongst students and the author.

As one example of how the genre could benefit classroom thought, Dr. Diamond provided an overview of the book *Incognegro*. The book provides a fictitious account of the early civic rights era and the antagonist Zane Pinchback who, as a light-skinned African American male, was able to infiltrate southern White societies and then report in a northern newspaper the atrocities and violence in the south against African Americans (Johnson, 2008). The discussion that resulted was fascinating as students explored the reality of the situation presented in the story as well as exploring the historical situation at the level of the individual consciousness (Burenheide, 2011).

Further discussion promoted the consideration of using graphica as a medium for quasi-historical and current sociological study. Examples presented included the discussion of social groups of individuals who are marginalized by society such as immigrants and their story being presented through the plight of the X-Men, a group of

societal mutants who are segregated in the alternate universe presented by Marvel Comics; the discussion of technology and how it could impact society and cultures today by discussing the impact technology has upon humans presented in comics such as Iron Man; or the presentation of terroristic activities by any sort of villains with agendas found in comics such as *Batman*, *Superman*, or *Justice League of America*. The presentation of Dr. Diamond brought forth an idea to use graphica as a means to present contemporary problems for students to explore in a non-threatening manner that may provide a milieu that is protected, constant, and engaging of student interest. Willona Sloan (2009) summarized the issue as such:

“Comic-loving educators argue that magna, comics, and graphic novels can engage students in learning new languages, boost literacy, enhance student vocabulary, and teach 21st century competencies.”

Thus the genesis for this model.

The Proposed Graphica Model and How it Fits Student Needs

Getting students engaged in sociology is vitally important to develop sophisticated understandings of culture and society (Eraslan, 2011). As noted by Eraslan (2011), we gain an understanding of cultural differences, the value of political effects, and provide the motivation for lifelong learning for an individual. Too often this becomes a process that is not meaningful for students who are forced to learn nothing but the facts of the discipline and are not immersed in “doing sociology.” Especially at the high school level where the discipline is presented as an introductory level class of terms and abstract ideas, sociology instruction is lacking the substance to promote ideas. Much of the research advocating

quality means of instruction is rooted in graduate level research, making the field inaccessible for younger students, in short, many students do not get a chance to participate in the research activities of sociology as illustrated by interesting articles of the field (Deflem, 2007; Paul, 2006; Persell & Mateiro, 2009).

The question becomes how do we provide meaningful opportunities to for students to explore the field of sociology and the sociological perspective through the means currently expounded in the field? Common sense tells us that it is difficult to engage students in open research in a field setting as they will encounter a multitude of issues that need careful guidance and monitoring on the part of the teacher. A further issue comes to the fore when we read the practicing sociologists viewpoints about how it is necessary for the burgeoning sociologist needs to understand their own position in the discipline before understanding the field (Ewan, 2009). These warns us that if we are to participate in doing some kind of research with our students, it must be in a very controlled setting where teachers can monitor the learning, yet engaging enough that students will maintain interest in the subject. Thus the purpose behind the model proposed below.

The model is built upon notions of experiential learning which extends to role playing and simulated learning. Kolb (1984) established a theory of experiential learning that allows for students to experience a learning session, propose a theory based upon that experience, then engage in a learning activity which results in learning of a concept, idea, or term. This model is further built upon situating a learner in a situation where they take on the role of a researcher and look at a field experience to grasp the concept being explored. Blatner (2009) offered role-playing as a learning experience that can be situated in the same position as experiential learning. This engaging of students in a research position

allows for student to tap the sociological imagination as well as allow them to acquire knowledge of sociological concepts through active learning (McKinney, 2011).

The model itself requires the teacher to identify the specific concept to be explored through the reading of a form of graphica. The graphic form is then given to students with a prompt to explore. Careful reading then occurs with the students utilizing a strategy to make it effective. Students then summarize their findings in a manner much as they would if exploring a historical primary source. While this description simplifies things, it can be dependent on the text being explored as well as the concept being addressed. Some examples of the model being addressed are found below:

Table 1

Sample Text Study Lesson

Text: *The Watchmen* by Alan Moore (1987).

Sociological Concept: Crime in Society

Activity Plan

1. Reading of Text Chapter by Chapter
2. Each Chapter Students Complete a Graphic Organizer (T-Chart)
 - a. Identify Crimes Committed in Each Chapter
 - b. Identify Societal Response to Crime
 - c. Propose Impact of Each Action Upon the Society as a Whole
3. Summarization of the findings from Step 2
4. Propose in a performance assessment the impact of crime on the society set in *The*

Watchmen

In the lesson described in Table 1, other concepts that could be explored include the impact of technology on society, the role political structure plays upon a society, or what conditions may be like in an urban setting as proposed by the work.

Table 2

Sample Text Study Lesson

Text: X-Men Age of X Series (2011).

Sociological Concept: Treatment of a marginalized group of people

Activity Plan

1. Dividing of class into five groups and distribution of five issues of the series.
2. Class reads their issue noting specific episodes of how “marginalized outsiders” are treated. The teacher should answer appropriate contextual clues from students.
3. Presentation of each group to the remainder of the class.
4. Summarization of class findings.

Assessment: Class discussion and sharing of summarizations

One thing to note about the forms of assessment and the utilization of this model is that like the primary source activities of a history classroom, the goal is to have students explore a sociological setting, not make “miniature sociologists.” The product does not have to be the same as a professional sociologist. As Husbands notes in the study of history (1996), students are not bound to the same constraints as the professional, thus allowing the student to fully engage in the discoveries of historians at a level equal to their development and understanding.

Why use graphica?

Why would individuals use graphica to illustrate the social constructs of a society? Deflem (2007) noted that movies can provide a multitude of opportunities to explore sociological constructs. But, there are two key components that make this model meaningful. First, there is a great interest in graphica amongst students as noted earlier in the article. Second, with the emphasis schools put on literacy in education and the world of high stakes testing, the importance of literacy needs to be highly improved. Accessing literacy to teach concepts such as those found in sociology provides students with the additional benefit of interaction with literacy which helps students learn vocabulary, text structure, and has been shown to improve writing (Sloan, 2009; Thompson, 2008).

Things to Consider In the Classroom

It is vitally important to dispel the myths of comic books like magna and other forms of graphica being a sex and violence-glorifying medium is the communication to constituents to tap the enthusiasm students will possess. To do so, it must be very clear that the selection of the work of graphica be cleared with the relevant constituents. One must address the concerns of administrators, parents, and students to ensure success (Sloan, 2009).

A second thing to be done to ensure success is that effective reading strategies be implemented in teaching and understanding the genre of graphica. It will be necessary for the teacher to have a firm grasp of effective reading strategies that allow students to firmly understand the nature of the text. If students are not provided with a effective means to record their findings, the exercise becomes nothing more than a reading of a comic book. It

is important that this not occur or a number of students will see this as a meaningless exercise and the genre as nothing more than recreational reading at best, not the meaningful medium that it is seen as.

Benefits of the Model

Frey and Fisher saw students were enthusiastic about graphica. The teachers implemented shared reading of a text and were able to discuss word choice, vocabulary, and were able to glean writing prompts from selected comics (Frey & Fisher, 2004). Inherent in the text are visual context clues to help promote vocabulary learning and build more complex and robust understandings (Frey & Fisher, 2004).

Glen Bledsoe who has used graphica as a means to encourage creativity, reading skills, and engagement in his public school classroom has noted the benefits of using graphica as a key component in his teaching noting: "Comics helped me learn to read and expand my vocabulary. For example, I know what invulnerable meant from reading Superman comics...the school texts were boring" (Faulkner, 2009).

There is a lot to be gained in terms of literacy and it holds promise for learning historical and sociological concepts. The author will be exploring this study in detail in the future.

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