Using Howard Zinn’s Graphic Textbook To Disrupt the Common-place:

Preservice Teachers’ Ways of Reading and Writing Transformative U.S. History
Role of Literacy in the Secondary Social Studies Classroom

- State of the Social Studies in the Curriculum
  - Reading, math and science privileged in elementary (VanFossen, 2005; Boyle-baise et. al. 2008)
  - At the secondary level – if it is not tested it is not taught.
- Common Core Curriculum
  - Literacy through History/Social Studies (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012)
- Changes in learning styles
  - Digital learners need to develop skills for visual or media literacy (Palfry & Gasser, 2008)
- Low teacher efficacy and even resistance to teaching reading
Background

- Not seeing evidence of literacy connection
- Model literacy through transformative text
- Introduced to “Social Studies” graphic novels

“One’s interpretive frameworks (Epstein, 2009) or web of knowledge (Wertsch, 2002) influences the way an individual interpret text.”
Why Graphic Texts?

- Comic books, graphic novels, manga, etc.
- Increasing in popularity among youth
- Incorporate students’ out-of-school literacies in the classroom
- Intertextuality requires that individuals read text and image together (Early, Fryer, Leckbee & Walton, 2004)
- Requires sophisticated literacy skills
- Motivates emerging and resistant readers
Disciplinary Literacy (DL)

- Historians read in a particular manner
  - Detecting bias, considering multiple perspectives, comparing and contrasting (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008)
  - Sourcing and contextualizing (Wineburg, 1998)
- Incorporated into the Common Core Curriculum
  - Determine central idea of a primary source document
  - Analyze and evaluate author’s purpose and premise
  - Evaluate perspectives of events to see which best matches textual evidence
Visual Literacy (VL)

- History and social studies content:
  - Incorporates visual images (e.g. photographs, political cartoons, propaganda, graphs/charts)
  - Images are often laden with symbolism, satire, irony (Burmack, 2008)
  - Analyzing current events requires that individuals be critical consumers of the media (Jenkins, 2007)

- Common Core
  - Determine the meaning of key symbols
  - Analyze and evaluate multiple sources of information in diverse formats/media
*Critical literacy involves “Reading the world” and “Writing the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987)

Questions who’s knowledge is privileged and why?

Ability to develop alternative ways of knowing

Critical literacy (Lewison, Flint & Sluys, 2002)

- Disrupting the common-place
- Interrogating multiple view points
- Focusing on sociopolitical issues
- Taking action to promote social justice
The Purpose of the Study

This particular research study seeks to examine Zinn, Konopacki, and Buhle’s (2008) *A People’s History of the American Empire* as a multi-genre graphic text with preservice teachers.

- Perceptions of using graphic novels in social studies classrooms
- Perceptions of using this transformative text
- How and if perservice teachers were using a CL framework, influenced by DL and VL, when interacting with this text.
Context of the Study

- Qualitative study of one class of preservice teachers
  - 13 undergraduates; 6 females and 7 males
  - Course: Social Studies - Content and Pedagogy

- Data Sources
  - 5 “Reader Response” assignments, Social Studies Competency Portfolio, whole class discussions, and individual interviews
Data Analysis

- Reconstruction Horizon Analysis (Carspecken, 1996)
  - Objective, Subjective, and normative claims

- Textual analysis coding for examples of Lewinson, Flint & Van Sluy’s (2002) framework for critical literacy
  - Disrupting the common-place (DC)
  - Interrogating multiple view points (IMP)
  - Focusing on sociopolitical issues (SP)
  - Taking action to promote social justice (ASJ)
Ways of Reading Current Controversial Topics

We could only imagine the terror among the passengers of the hijacked planes as they contemplated the crash, the fire, the end. Then our political leaders came on television, and I was horrified and sickened again. They spoke of retaliation, of vengeance, of punishment…And I thought, “They have learned nothing, absolutely noting, from the history of the twentieth century, from a hundred years of retaliation, vengeance, war”…We are committing terrorism in order to “send a message” to terrorists (Zinn, Knoopacki, & Buhle, 2008, p. 4).
10 Students Found Zinn’s Message Problematic

- The U.S. often uses its superior technology and military to bully other nations into doing what it wants...I don’t agree with Zinn in that, as a Nation, we should have sat back and done nothing.” [Anthony]

- This was an attack on our homeland...The thought of retaliation and vengeance was not something that was far-fetched ... I find it hard to believe that at that time he did not want to strike back as well. [Rachel]
3 students highlighted the irony in contradictory messages after September 11th.

- U.S. condemns terrorist and then takes the same action to send a message and still has not wiped terrorism from the world. [Frank] (DC)
- We teach our students to play nice and not judge someone and then President Bush says “we shall make no distinction” (p.4). [Amanda] (DC)
- We are committing terrorism in order to ‘send a message’ to terrorists” (p.4). Serving in Operation Iraqi freedom, I had the unique ability to witness this personally.” [Jorge] (DC)
To be honest, I have never learned anything about the Philippines in any of my history classes…What I like about this text is how Zinn speaks about events that one would never hear about in a high school history class or history textbook. In this chapter Zinn talks about the Battle of Bud Dajo, which was a massacre of Philippine forces by American forces [Christopher]

We never learned that the Black 25th infantry were actually the first to liberate San Juan Hill, Cuba during the Spanish, American War [Jorge]

Chapter one states off by saying “the massacre at Wounded Knee marked the domination of the continent by white men,” (p. 9). The statement represents the imperialism implemented by “white men”, when they arrived in the U.S., and forced onto natives. It is interesting to see how our discussion in class on cultural imperialism really brought to light all the different forms of imperialism and even controversies. [Victoria]
Honestly I had a very strong reaction to this reading. I remember growing up learning about the values of the “American” way of life and how the U.S. was a just and righteous country, “protector” of the world. We were never taught of the atrocities committed against Native Americans at the Massacre at Wounded Knee. Being [in the military] I find this detestable being that it goes against everything we are taught. The protection of the weak and innocent are the values that guided me in war and keep me from losing my humanity. But it seems the very institution that was responsible for teaching me those values did not find it necessary to apply them. Since they saw the Native Americans (as well as others) as savages this allowed them to carry out horrible acts in order to achieve what they saw as progress. [Jorge]
Contrasting Ways of Reading Socio-Cultural Issues: Poverty

- I feel as though there are too many cases in modern times where children grow up in not necessarily the best conditions. Two things can come from this. The parents complain about being poor and blame the government for all of their problems, but never really do anything about it...or children compare their lives to other children who are better off and, in turn, lack appreciation for their parents who are trying to do everything in their power to keep them happy and safe and fed. [Rachel]

- I’ve always resented statements of politicians, and corporate executives who talked of how, in America, if you worked hard you would become rich. The meaning of that was, “if you were poor, it was because you hadn’t worked hard enough.” Zinn brings to light the struggle of the working class. Although they might not be rich it does not change the fact that they work just as hard as the rich do. [Victoria]
Disciplinary Literacy

- All 13 preservice teachers identified the author’s bias
  - 2 thought the text should not be used at all based on this bias
  - 3 were attracted to the text because of the author’s slant (did not critique it)
  - 4 felt this graphic text could balance out a traditional textbook
  - 4 felt the traditional textbook was necessary to balance out the graphic novel.

- Evidence from 4 preservice teachers = that they learned “content” reading this text

- 4 contextualized the author’s perspective (e.g. participation in WWII, involvement in Workers’ Rights movements)

- No evidence that they were analyzing Zinn’s sources
  - nor comparing and contrasting content from other sources
Visual Literacy

- 2 rejected the text = “Gory” details
- I felt the drawings were too simplistic’
- 10 discussed the images as a way to support struggling readers and ELLs or entertain readers
- None of the preservice teachers discussed skills necessary for analyzing images or political cartoons
The Messiness of Critical Work

- Examples where they are “reading the world”
  - Interrogating multiple viewpoints of historical events
  - Awakening consciousness and becoming critical inquirers
  - Identifying socio-political issues of ethnocentrism, racism, classism and imperialism
  - One preservice teachers could envision other ways for U.S. interaction in the world - establish relationships built on trust.

- But do they feel agency needed for “writing the world?”
  - Limited evidence of developing steps for social action
Implications for Social Studies Teacher Educators

- We can promote reading within the content we teach
- Critical literacy promotes goals necessary for social studies for social justice
- Graphic novels can provide platform to develop intertextuality
  - Yet controversy over images may cause reluctance
- Preservice teachers can learn to read the world
  - Need to help them foster processes to write the world
Final Thoughts

- Let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: --Behold! Human beings living in an underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance...and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets...To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. (Socrates translated by Jowette, 1991)

- Reading this text reminds me of a conversation we were having in my philosophy class the other day about Plato’s allegory of the cave. I feel like I was one of those prisoners in the cave before reading this text, only knowing a very limited amount of history. Then I read Zinn’s text and I feel like the prisoner’s released from the cave and realizing that what I thought was reality was really just a shadow. (Amanda)