Using Sequential Art to Engage Students in Historical Understanding

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Abstract

This study examines how the use of Sequential Art in a single classroom in a suburban high school supported students in the development of their historical understanding. The primary research question of the study is: How does the use of Sequential Art support students in developing the six components of historical thinking and understanding, as observed in the classroom by the researcher, as reported by the classroom teacher, and as determined through student focus groups, curriculum documents, and student work products?

The research participants were drawn from a convenience sampling of a single tenth-grade United States History II class from a regional high school in southeastern Massachusetts. Triangulated by collecting data from multiple sources, including observations, teacher interviews, student focus groups, curriculum documents, and student work. Historical understanding was defined using van Drie and van Boxtel’s (2007) framework. In addition, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Learning Theory (1971; 1978; 1986) and Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2003) informed the analysis of the findings. The findings of the study suggest that Sequential Art can be an extremely useful medium for supporting students’ engagement in historical thinking and understanding.

Key Words: Sequential Art; Six Components of Historical Understanding; Comic Books; Sociocultural Learning Theory; Experiential Learning Theory
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Chapter I: Introduction

Problem of Practice

It has been suggested that the lack of historical understanding among most high school students is the result of not requiring them to engage in historical thinking within the classroom (Lee & Molebash, 2004). Too often, high school students are taught history as facts and dates rather than as the examination of primary sources and the development of historical thinking and understanding. To counter this systemic problem, students must be historically literate within specific parameters, capable of historical analysis and the synthesis of history, and able to compose historical arguments (Leinhardt, 1994). The use of primary sources is fundamental in establishing a historical mindset because it fosters independent thought (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996). It has been argued that educators can engage students in historical subjects by establishing a link to their lives through combining texts with artifacts and primary sources (Hansen, 2009). Instructors can create a successful learning environment by fostering historical understanding and thinking through learner interests and primary sources (Polman, 2006; Hallden, 1994; McKeown & Beck, 1994).

The typical high school student demonstrates neither established historical understanding nor interest in history (Liu, Shen, Warren, & Cowart, 2006). According to Liu et al., students’ inability to demonstrate historical understanding is related to the persistent use of recitations, seatwork, and factual memorization in classrooms, techniques which only foster the short-term recall of information rather than rich analysis. Many history teachers create learning environments that promote the memory of factual knowledge rather than historical thinking and understanding (Polman, 2006).
Historical thinking encompasses the ability to analyze, synthesize, and construct arguments grounded in primary sources as well as textbooks (Leinhardt, 1994). In the best of circumstances, teachers should think like historians. The teachers’ own understanding of historical thinking may be incomplete or limited as their training is likely to be based in the teaching of psychology or civics rather than in historical thinking, understanding, and inquiry (Grant, 2001). Historical thinking and understanding require a capacity to see and appreciate the past through various perspectives (Liu et al., 2006). Therefore, students need to engage in historical thinking in order to advance their depth of understanding about history (de Oliveira, 2008).

To engage in historical thinking requires students to routinely immerse themselves in the study of history using the strategies of historical inquiry (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996). Historical thinking and inquiry requires students to investigate primary sources. By examining multiple texts, documents, and artifacts, students will be exposed to a variety of perspectives (Britt et al., 1996). The routine examination and analysis of primary sources by students and teachers can expand their ability to think historically (Brooks, 2008). The use of primary sources, combined with other sources, leads to a greater contextual understanding and a more evolved historical interpretation by students because their understanding goes beyond the words offered in a textbook (Wineburg & Fournier, 1994).

Significance of the Problem

The Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework (2003) calls for high school instructors to foster twenty-seven concepts and skills categorized under history, geography, and economics. Massachusetts students are expected to complete United States History I (1763-1877), United States History II (1877-2001), World History II (1688-2001), and
a Social Studies elective during their four years of high school (Driscol, 2003). To complement this expectation, the National Curriculum Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) calls for instructors to address ten themes, which include: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Science, Technology, and Society; Global Connections; Civic Ideals and Practices (NCSS, 2011). The ultimate goal of Social Studies is to produce graduates who can think independently and pursue greater understanding of the past (Slater, 1995). Unfortunately, the breadth of knowledge expected by state expectations and school curriculum may press history teachers to cover the names, dates, and facts of this material at the expense of meaningfully engaging students in historical inquiry to develop the kinds of historical understanding and thinking benefitting students beyond the simple accumulation of knowledge (Wineburg, 1994).

**Use of Sequential Art**

Sequential Art can take the form of a comic strip, a comic book, or a graphic novel. Each of these forms of Sequential Art offers a series of illustrated panes that tell a story in sequence. Readers gain an authentic learning experience from the narrative visual framework of Sequential Art (Adams, 2008; Albers, 2006; Moreno & Mayer, 2007; El Refaie, 2009; Mandaville & Avila, 2009; Medley, 2010). Sequential Art is a medium with which most students are familiar.

Sequential Art connects with student culture. Like hypertext, Sequential Art can read in various ways (Cromer & Clark, 2007). Sequential Art bridges student culture and the academic curriculum (Versaci, 2008; Carter, 2009; Figueiredo, 2011). For instance, Sequential Art is already a medium that is valuable to youngsters because it is a medium that many embrace for leisure reading (Christensen, 2006). Identifying the use of video games, iPods, and other visual
tools, scholars argue that Sequential Art fits with today’s youngsters because they are a visual
generation (Carter, 2007; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Wolsey, 2008; Short & Reeves, 2009; Cohn,

Sequential Art provides an alternative medium to those students who are hesitant to
engage the academic narrative. For instance, Vizzini (2009) concludes that reluctant students will
engage “…the mysteries of history” through Sequential Art (p. 243). The illustrated panes of
Sequential Art allow students to understand abstract ideas (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999;
Moreno & Valdez, 2005; Reed, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Buhle, 2007; Hutchinson, 2009).
Many educators value Sequential Art as a learning resource.

Scholars praise the use of Sequential Art in the classroom. It scaffolds student learning
for the purposes of abstract skills and concepts (Carter, 2007; Smetana, Odelson, Burns, &
Grisham, 2009). Further, several scholars conclude that Sequential Art is a strong learning
resource because of its ability to display several story-lines simultaneously (Chun, 2009; Risko,
Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, & Wilson, 2011). Sequential Art as a literacy tool contributes to
historical thinking and understanding (Buhle, 2005; Versaci, 2008; Seelow, 2010; Fisher & Frey,
2007; Adams, 2008; Bitz, 2004; Pifel, 2010; Morell, 2002; Versaci, 2008; Matthews, 2011;
Moeller, 2011). In terms of teaching, Sequential Art can positively support quality lessons,
guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent reading (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Harris,
2007; Scraffenberger, 2007; Carter, 2009). In terms of historical thinking and understanding,
Sequential Art helps frame student understanding within history (Aiken, 2010; Barr, 2009).

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The intellectual goal of this study is to assess how the use of Sequential Art in one
classroom may have contributed to students’ engagement in historical thinking and
understanding, as discerned through classroom observations, student focus groups, and teacher interviews. The practical goal of this study is to contribute to educators’ understanding of how Sequential Art could be used to further students’ learning in history, particularly their engagement in historical thinking and understanding.

**Research Question**

The primary research question guiding this case study is:

How does the use of Sequential Art support students in employing the six components of historical thinking and understanding, as observed in the classroom, reported by the classroom teacher, and determined through student focus groups and work products?

**Summary of Paper Content and Organization**

This thesis is presented in five chapters. The first chapter presents the problem of practice, its significance, the research question, and the theoretical framework informing the study. The second chapter provides a literature review related to an overview of research on the development of historical thinking as well as its significance in schools and beyond, including an explanation of the six components of historical understanding. The third chapter presents the Research Design of the study, including the selection of participants as well as the collection and analysis of data. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data as collected, including key themes as they emerged from the interviews with the teacher, focus groups with students, and observations of the classroom. And, finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the research findings, including implications, limitations of the study, and ideas for future research.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework comprises three theories: (1) Vygotsky’s theory of sociocultural learning, including student culture, mediating tools of learning, and zone of
proximal development; (2) Kolb’s experiential learning theory, and (3) the six components of historical understanding (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007).

**Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Learning Theory.** Lev Vygotsky (1897-1934) developed several influential ideas regarding student learning and how the social environment and interaction supported youths’ learning. Three of these ideas are presented below: the engagement of youths’ culture in supporting their academic learning, the zone of proximal development, and the use of language and images as tools for mediating learning. Each of these is discussed in relationship to the use of Sequential Art for learning.

Vygotsky (1986) points out that connecting students’ every day culture can be used to support learning. For example, a teacher can conduct a lesson that incorporates major league baseball statistics in order to demonstrate principles of mathematics. In other words, a student’s ability to engage in their own culture can empower them to engage in academic culture, but it is dependent on the ability of the instructor, to make or facilitate these connections. Vygotsky explained that children’s exploration (or play) could be used as a meaningful vehicle for learning, for example through the use of rap music in English class. Using Vygotsky’s day-to-day social knowledge to understand more academic language and content can be a bridge for student learning. Vygotsky went on to explain that a person’s capacity to engage in academic speak could be greatly enhanced by connecting the personal culture of the student to the academic language and culture of school. This study focuses on Vygotsky’s theory with regard to helping students connect what they see to historical thinking and understanding.
Figure 1. Aspects of student culture that shape the learning process

Vygotstsky (1978) often used the phrase “zone of proximal development” (ZPD) to identify the learning process that modern scholars have referred to as scaffolding. He explained that ZPD “… is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 87). Thus providing learning opportunities just out of reach of students’ conceptual understanding, with some guidance, can lead them to new understandings. The “zone of proximal development” is meant to convey the idea of “stretching” students’ thinking and understanding just beyond their current state into a new way of thinking and understanding.

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that experiential learning was the most effective way to stretch students’ understanding; any teaching system based solely on memorization and
attainment of facts will fail to move students to more sophisticated ways of thinking. Vygotsky argued that moving students through the zone of proximal development must be supported by students’ social engagement with adult guidance as well as an experiential learning environment. A combination of play and instruction can support student movement through the zone of proximal development, dependent on the knowledge of the students and the knowledge presented to the students in the context of social interaction. As Vygotsky (1978) explained the process, social interaction was a necessary and universal aspect of developing cultural knowledge: “In conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive. Desire or need lead to request, question to answer, bewilderment to explanation” (p. 181). The zone of proximal development can be engaged through “…conditions of systematic cooperation between the child and the teacher” (p. 148). A collaborative form of teaching that harnesses child’s “play-reality” promotes their intellectual development (1978, pp. 102-103). The purpose of this study is to consider whether greater historical thinking and understanding in the context of social interaction around Sequential Art.
The third idea used in the analysis of this case study is Vygostky’s theory of language and imagery being “mediating tools of learning.” Vygotsky (1978) explained that, “…some psychologists have used the word ‘tool’ when referring to the indirect function of an object as the means for accomplishing some activity” (pp. 52-55). For example, in this study, when students read a comic story that described the dropping of the atomic bomb, their faith in that historical decision was shaken. When students examined propaganda within WWII comic books that dehumanized the Japanese, they were distressed. In these examples Sequential Art served as a mediating tool of learning.

Figure 2. Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky (1978) concluded that a student’s capacity to learn greatly increases by coupling words with visuals. Visual representation can be used to enhance students’ access to new learning. Imagery can be said, then, to aid the student in learning.

Figure 3: A representation of Vygotsky’s cultural mediation showing the presence of developmental depth in all organism–society interactions

Retrieved from http://www.integralworld.net/edwards17.html

The three ideas presented above suggest several implications for this study. There is substantial literature that suggests that instructional scaffolding can be greatly enhanced through the use of visuals and words, as seen in Sequential Art. In the spirit of Vygotsky’s view, that development follows learning, this study examines how student learning can be greatly improved by the combination of language and imagery. This study examines how learning can be impacted by Sequential Art.

**Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)**

Vygotsky’s views, especially in the area of social cultural learning, strongly relate to David A. Kolb’s (1939 - ) theory of Experiential Learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb’s experiential learning cycle suggests four different learning stages: concrete experience, reflective
observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Smith, 2001). The concrete experience stage of learning includes active experimentation and abstract conceptualization. During this phase, the learner displays deductive reasoning and is able to display a practical application of ideas, as in the previously cited example in the present study, in which students identified the dehumanization of the Japanese in various comic book covers (e.g., “Superman says: ‘It’s okay to slap a Jap’”).

In the reflective observation stage, the learner displays a strong imaginative ability and can consider ideas from various perspectives (Kolb, 1981). An example of this in the present study can be seen in the larger class dialogue, during which students speculated why this racist propaganda was widespread in comic books published during WWII.

The abstract conceptualization stage is when the learner reveals an ability to consider abstract concepts and can be reflective through observation. At this stage, the learner showcases an ability to create theoretical models and to exercise inductive reasoning, but is more concerned with abstract ideas than with people. An example of this occurred in the present study when students discussed the motivation of the publishers to produce such racist propaganda. Some student discussion points included mobilization as well programming of peoples’ thoughts.

In the last stage, active experimentation, the learner’s greatest strength is doing things, taking risks, and solving problems intuitively. During the active experimentation stage in the present study, students concluded that many of the racist comic books published during WWII were morally wrong and unacceptable.

These stages noted by Kolb (1981) serve as steps in the experiential learning process in a spiral-like pattern (pp. 4-5). Kolb concluded that, “The experiential learning model represents an integration of many of the intensive lines of research on cognitive development and cognitive
In the examination of propaganda comic book covers of the present study, students evolved from bewilderment to righteous indignation.

Kolb (1981) argued that academic failure by students frequently originates within a mismatch between their learning style and the demands of a specific discipline, obstructing the array of developmental pathways. Those educators who offer more access points – including all stages as presented by Kolb above – have more successful students. Kolb concluded, “Through socialization experiences in family, school, and work, we come to resolve the conflicts between action and reflection and between immediate experiences and detached analysis in characteristic ways” (p. 131).

**The Six Components of Historical Understanding**

In 2007, Jannet van Drie and Carla van Boxtel provided a framework for discussing and evaluating historical thinking and understanding through six components. Those components, which serve, according to van Drie and van Boxtel, as distinct measures of historical understanding, are:

- use of Substantive Concepts (to identify terms, dates, and people)
- use of Meta-Concepts (to measure conflicts in cultures – Protestants vs. Catholics)
- use of contextualization (to distinguish Victorian and contemporary values)
- use of argumentation (to forward a logical rationale based on the evidence)
- use of historical questions (to pose a question that is descriptive, causal, comparative, or evaluative: e.g., “Was the Civil War about states’ rights?”)
- use of sources (to use primary sources and artifacts to support historical thinking).

(van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 90).
These components serve as a framework for evaluating the degree to which Sequential Art supports historical thinking and understanding, as described below.

Substantive concepts are those constructs that organize the past through description (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 100). Substantive concepts have allowed scholars to organize phenomena, persons, and periods thematically, e.g., the Roman Empire, Farm to Factory, and Reconstruction. (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 101). Substantive concepts refer to the identifications student must know in order to engage in historical thinking and understanding. Substantive concepts can lead to Meta-Concepts.

Meta-concepts refer to those skills historians employ when examining, corroborating and questioning the events, changes, and patterns of our past, for example the judgment used in determining the reliability of a source (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 102). Meta-concepts could be used in the classroom, for example, in a discussion of whether the American Civil War was fought over “states’ rights” or the moral question of slavery.
**Contextualization** is the capacity of students to place events and movements within a spatial frame, a social frame, or a chronological frame of reference (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 102). Contextualization is displayed, for example, when a historian examines the past through the lens of slavery, economics, or the closing of the frontier to further settlement. Contextualization could be used in the classroom, for example, in the instructive use of *Poor Richard’s Almanac* published by Benjamin Franklin, which showcases the virtues of Colonial America. One historic component, like contextualization, supports the historian in employing another component, like argumentation.

**Argumentation** is the ability to assert a rational premise composed from an interpretation of the evidence (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). For example, a historian may ascribe a number of motivations to support slavery such as racism, economics, or religion. Thus, the historian must be able to engage the historical question via argumentation.

**Historical questions** promote historical thinking and understanding through the raising of questions that are descriptive, causal, comparative, or evaluative (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 92). An example of a historical question is, “Why did Abraham Lincoln release the Emancipation Proclamation?” This type of question will lead to such contrasting answers as, “To abolish slavery” and “To strengthen the Union’s military efforts.” To determine which answer has more credibility, the historian must consider the sources.

**Use of sources** is the capacity of students to acquire information from a range of different sources, written documents, images, and objects (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 92). For example, a teacher might require students to corroborate a primary source (i.e., a letter from the Civil War or a propaganda poster) with the text book. In furnishing students with two conflicting
letters from the American Civil War over the moral question of slavery, the teacher forces students to use their judgment as a historian to form an argument.

Summary

These six components of historical understanding, along with Kolb’s experiential learning and Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning, form this study’s theoretical framework. Specifically, the scaffolding of history through Sequential Art relates to Vygotsky; the active experience of reading a comic story relates to Kolb; the six components of historical understanding connect learning to the field of history. Students in this study displayed elements of historical thinking and understanding along with Vygotsky’s sociocultural learning and Kolb’s experiential learning in their examination of Sequential Art.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The literature review comprises four areas:

- Teaching History
- Historical Thinking and Understanding
- Primary Sources in Teaching History
- Sequential Art in Teaching History

These four areas will provide further information and research regarding the need for improving understanding within a history education.

Teaching History

Many scholars have suggested that historical thinking and understanding in classrooms is overlooked in an effort to have students master a chronological list of facts: “…Historical understanding can mean anything from memorizing a list of dates to mastering a set of logical relations, from being able to recite an agreed-upon story to contending with ill-defined problems
resistant to single interpretations” (Wineburg, 2001, p. 29). At the center of that misplaced focus has been the role of the history textbook. With such an emphasis on the textbook, it is understandable that historical thinking and understanding is minimized for students. Wineburg (2001) argues that authentic historical thought calls on students to think and reason in sophisticated ways. In other words, teachers should be teaching students how to think like historians and not simply to memorize dates, names, and events.

In a theoretical essay on the teaching of history, Yilmaz (2008) suggested that high school students should be engaged in more frequent collaboration between professional historians and educators. Yilmaz also suggested that students should be able to identify relationships between various facts and link them to historical events. History education should be aimed at developing the historical thinking and reasoning skills of students by providing them with historical knowledge, procedures, and the skills necessary to be informed members of society (Yilmaz, 2008). The focus should not be solely on the memorization of facts and events.

This viewpoint is further supported by Wiley and Voss (1996), who discerned a clear difference in how most high school students understand history and how professional historians define historical understanding. Unlike students, who see history as a chronological list of facts, names, and events, historians see it as a capacity to analyze and form an argument based on the evidence. Wiley and Voss explained, “Students were more likely to write an analysis when presented with the information in the form of separate sources than when presented with a textbook-like chapter” (p. 438.6).

A related study conducted by Bain (2006) focused on the deference given to teachers and textbooks at the expense of students’ independent historical understanding. The role of historians as detectives pursuing plausible explanations for events, trends, and controversies was seen as
much different than the role of students, which was simply to master the facts as fed to them by teachers (2006). Bain concluded that, “The textbook market grows steadily, but so do the attacks on the veiled ideological stances in these books and their banal rhetoric, incoherence, and failure to help students learn the content” (p. 2081).

In a similar vein, VanSledright (1995) explained that learning in the history classroom was defined by success on tests that measure recall and chronologically arranged facts (1995). The study emphasized that we must move away from this approach by placing students at the heart of learning, ultimately concluding that student historical understanding was being “…sacrificed to the kettle of fact stew, and their sense of why they study American history will remain only tangentially linked to their lives” (p. 343).

Like VanSledright, Paxton (1997) asserted that students had a blind dependence on textbooks. Paxton’s study drew on a sampling of six high school sophomores who engaged in questionnaires, two textbook presentations, and a “think-aloud” textbook assignment; observations by the researcher; and semi-structured interviews and closing questions. The study concluded that students were conditioned to view historical understanding as the chronological memorization of facts (1997).

A connected study by Nokes, Dole, and Hacker (2007) claimed that increased learning could be achieved through the instructional use of multiple documents rather than a single text. Based on the information gathered, the study concluded that the skills of a historian must be imparted to students by their teachers. Similarly, Puteh, Maarof, and Tak concluded that teachers must “…equip themselves with historical thinking skills so that the process of teaching and learning can be more effective which in turn could help enhance students’ acquisition of historical thinking skills” (2010, p. 87). Feedback gained from students in their study revealed
that many teachers were unable or unwilling to guide students through the process of thinking like a historian.

In sum, teachers should have students think about history in a multifaceted, interdisciplinary way. History as a human experience should be considered through the use of cultural artifacts to better understand the social, political, economic, geographic, and religious conflicts that defined the past (Swafford & McNulty, 2010). Teachers must align their teaching styles with the ways students learn (Kolb, 1981).

In order to align the ways instructors teach with the ways students learn, much of the literature insists that all instruction must incorporate a multi-modal approach. Multi-modal instruction – allowing the learner to listen, visualize, and read – is a form of scaffolding that positions students to examine historical concepts through both words and images (Moreno & Mayer, 1999). Moreno found that, “Metacognitive prompts consisted of activating the teaching principles learned and focusing students’ attention on relevant classroom information” (2009, p. 487). Moreno, in a later study, concluded that the combination of visuals and words gave students a deeper understanding over those students who simply had traditional instruction (2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006).

**Historical Thinking and Understanding**

In concert with the above literature, a variety of studies attest to the need for authentic historical understanding. According to Liu et al. (1996), there is a lack of deep historical understanding among high school students. Students should be capable of analyzing, synthesizing and composing arguments (Leinhardt, 1994). For such reasons as teachers not having a background in history, a commitment to memorization as well as seat work at the expense of true understanding, students are not displaying historical understanding, thinking, or
inquiry (Grant, 2001). Put simply, most teachers are not fulfilling the need for historical thinking and understanding because they are not routinely immersing their students in history (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996). Too often, teachers familiarize students with dates and events but do not foster an authentic understanding of the past (Wineburg, 1994).

Akinoglu (2009) states that historical understanding requires individuals to display a habit of evaluating historical events with a specific context, to examine historical artifacts and culture, and to maintain an objective approach. Akinoglu’s study employed a qualitative research design that was built on face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, with thirty-six teacher trainees. Akinoglu concluded that imparting historical understanding upon students is crucial in empowering them independent thinkers.

In a 2008 study, Brooks concluded that to fulfill the need for historical understanding and thinking, teachers must help students transition from inferential thoughts to logical analysis linked to the evidence (2008). Brooks’ study claimed that, “Historical inquiry provides for the novice and the expert alike, the opportunity to expand one’s capacity to entertain perspectives different from one’s own” (2008, p. 130). In the present study, students fostered historical empathy, allowing them to consider alternative perspectives through Sequential Art. One way to fulfill the need for historical understanding and thinking is through the use of primary sources.

**Primary Sources in Teaching History**

An empirical study produced by O’Neill and Weiler (2010) claimed that to establish historical understanding among students, teachers must require students to interpret primary sources first-hand. The study ultimately concluded that students must have classroom exposure to primary sources in order to have the cognitive tools to interpret history. These activities
required students to organize the instruction they had received, specifically vocabulary acquisition and concepts understood in graphic organizers.

Paras, Piche, & Nillas (2010) claim that using primary sources in history class can greatly augment students’ learning experience, critical thinking skills, and comprehension. In their study they ultimately concluded that primary sources, when used properly, promote students’ stronger critical thinking skills as well as their empathy in relation to their own historical understanding (2010). In another study by Hynd, Holschuh, & Hubbard (2004), it was found that students read documents as if they were historical truths while historians read them as if they were part of a subjective viewpoint. The results of both studies show the importance of not only using primary sources, but of teaching students how to read these sources in a way that will lead to understanding.

Leinhardt (1998) corroborated these findings, saying, “Within history, writing from primary documents to construct an evidenced interpretation of an issue requires students to transform both background and document knowledge, read and interpret historical documents, and manage discourse synthesis” (p. 25). The study identified different patterns that participants established. Through this exercise, students moved from simply “… listing ideas in sequence to conceptually framing their thoughts with causal and qualifier connects” (Leinhardt, p. 46).

Hicks and Doolittle (2004) claimed there was an untapped potential for the use of primary sources within the history classroom. Students typically experienced the social studies classroom as “a place where they passively listened to lectures, read textbooks and biographies, worked independently, and engaged in lower-order, fact-based assessments” (p. 216). They found that educators must move away from exclusively using text-based instruction in order to incorporate greater use of primary sources. Further, their study demonstrated the instructional
use of primary sources was essential for the development of historical thinking skills, grasping historical facts, interpretation, and questioning historical truths.

Other studies also support the view that students need to shift their thinking from a textbook-based approach to an approach that includes the analysis of cultural and historical artifacts (Key, Bradley, & Bradley, 2010; Xu, 2002). Exposing students to cultural artifacts triggered their conceptual understanding within history (Swafford & McNulty, 2010). Their progression of understanding could be measured by their capacity to examine multiple perspectives, personalize history, and contextualize the past. Students who are able to independently examine sources are more intrinsically motivated to learn. Artifacts have the potential to create multiple avenues for learning, including the examination of possibilities, facets, uncertainties, and ambiguities characteristic of history rather than a series of “black and white” events (Swafford & McNulty).

**Sequential Art in Teaching History**

Many scholars claim that Sequential Art has learning value and can complement classroom instruction. Comic book artist and scholar Will Eisner first coined the term “Sequential Art.” “In modern times,” he explained, “daily newspaper strips, comic books and more recently, graphic novels provide the major outlets for sequential art” (1985, p. 1). He captured Sequential Art’s essence when he explained, “Comics communicate in a ‘language’ that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience” (1985). Eisner forecast that, “…the comics’ medium is a literary/art form, and as it matures, it aspires to recognition as a legitimate medium” (1996, p. xii).

Sequential Art is a literacy tool that enables students to explore the past through words and images (Buhle, 2005; Versaci, 2008; Seelow, 2010). The instructional use of Sequential Art
– to elicit student analysis, historical reasoning through discussion – can establish authentic experiences and thus constitute a visual pedagogy of history, which encourages students to compose questions (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Adams, 2008). Sequential Art communicates differently than other literacies and is more powerful because it embraces and exaggerates its delivery methods (Albers, 2006; Moreno & Mayer, 2007; El Refaie, 2009; Mandaville & Avila, 2009; Medley, 2010). It engages readers in an interactive experience and builds a visual world that enhances opportunities for shared-knowledge between the author and the reader (Versaci, 2008; Carter, 2009; Figueiredo, 2011). It may fill the void that is missing in students’ experiences with historical pedagogy.

One study concluded that, in terms of literacy, Sequential Art increased student performance through experiential learning. The author’s data – from student artifacts, educator testimonies, and observation logs – led him to conclude that Sequential Art was a medium that positioned students to learn (Bitz, 2004). Graphic Novels, a form of Sequential Art, are a credible and academic method to teach history (Pifel, 2010).

Sequential Art provides a vehicle for students to form and answer questions – a component missing from traditional history instruction (Cohn, 2009; Seelow, 2010). In an unintended fashion, Sequential Art promotes the honing of academic skills (Hughes-Hassell, 2007; Burton, 2008; Botzakis, 2009; Chaney, 2009; Barr, 2010). The images and dialogue of Sequential Art enable students to access abstract, scholarly prose (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999; Moreno & Valdez, 2005; Reed, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006; Buhle, 2007; Hutchinson, 2009). Another study suggested that like hypertext, Sequential Art is a format with which students are familiar. It is flexible, open-ended, can be approached in multi-layered ways, and can be read in both a linear and a non-linear way (Cromer & Clark, 2007).
In an additional study, Carter measured how the use of Sequential Art expanded his students’ capacity to communicate a story (2007). Students’ written work improved as a result of deepening their individual voices and conveying ideas within student-produced graphic novels (2007). A wider study, conducted with deaf students, showed that Sequential Art fostered “…a ladder-type progression for acquiring the mainstream language…” (Smetana, Odelson, Burns, & Grisham, 2009, p. 230). Sequential Art engages students through context-rich, high-interest environments and by fostering vocabulary development (2007).

In one publication, “‘Aren’t These Boy Books?’ High School Students’ Readings of Gender in Graphic Novels,” Moeller (2011) provides several examples of how students can interpret the meaning of actions by certain characters and the analysis of plot in Sequential Art. In addition, there is a substantial amount of literature that claims that Sequential Art positions students to deconstruct narratives and offer their interpretation (Morell, 2002; Versaci, 2008; Matthews, 2011; Moeller, 2011).

If Sequential Art succeeds in representing the past, then history educators should utilize it to fill the pedagogical void within the discipline (Cromer & Clark, 2007; McTaggert, 2008; Streufert, 2009; Pifel, 2010). Vizzini argued that not only does Sequential Art contextualize the past, it also enables entry-level students to intuitively understand “…the mysteries of history” (2009, p. 243). Like artifacts, samples of Sequential Art can contextualize the past by reflecting the politics, prejudices, and concerns of a historical moment (Aiken, 2010). Many scholars claim that Sequential Art can be used in the classroom through lessons, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent reading (Fisher & Frey, 2007; Harris, 2007; Scraffenberger, 2007; Carter, 2009).
Chaney (2009) underscored the value of Sequential Art in requiring students to form historical arguments. Students were able, he insisted, to gain perspective and empathize with historical and cultural figures through the use of artifacts. Further, he explained, “Supplying them with brief critical overviews of racism perpetuated in primarily visual domains, therefore, has been essential to our [class] discussions” (2009, p. 70). He praised the medium because he insisted that it reflected the “…crude ore of marginalized feeling and imagination transforms into the precious metal of culturally meaningful art, language, and narrative” (p. 70).

A related study echoed this view, emphasizing that since “…graphic novels are popular with teens, using a few well-chosen ones in the classroom” can “initiate conversations about racism, social justice and global conflict…” (Christensen, 2006, p. 227). The combination of words and images as seen in graphic novels enhanced the study of history because it had a capacity to display several story-lines simultaneously; it could juxtapose a number of story elements (Chun, 2009; Risko, Walker-Dalhouse, Bridges, & Wilson, 2011). A number of studies also claim that because of its multimodal quality, Sequential Art encourages students to display historical methods by interpreting meaning from symbols, metaphors, and analogies, while inferring causality as well as relationships to abstract concepts (Carter, 2007; Frey & Fisher, 2007; Wolsey, 2008; Short & Reeves, 2009; Cohn, 2010; Spezzini, 2010; Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011).

In addition to the above, Sequential Art can serve as a historical source that conveys the past to students because it links their current experience (i.e. exposure to Sequential Art) with historical understanding (Frey & Fisher, 2007; Adams, 2008). The use of a narrative visual framework can imbue readers with authentic historical experiences that constitute a visual pedagogy (2008). Adams explained, “…artist-authors have turned to the image-text medium to
represent catastrophic social events…” (p. 35) through a visual framework that framed the lived experience of historical figures. A corroborating study concluded that, “Teachers may use comic books in many ways to support student learning and scaffold reading and writing and for other important educational purposes: stimulating critical thinking, providing alternative views of history, and for problem-solving in various content areas” (Carter, 2007, p. 239).

A related study by Barr (2009) documented the use of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tail* in her Holocaust literature class, specifically how she required students to debate Holocaust history using the graphic novel on a daily basis. Students speculated on the different perspectives of each of the characters and analyzed the work’s meaning. Students recognized Sequential Art as a powerful medium that conveyed a complex story of historical significance while exhibiting historical thinking (i.e. analysis, synthesis, and constructed arguments) that is often missing from the history classroom (Barr, 2009).

Tally and Goldenberg (2005) echoed that study’s sentiment in their work, going beyond the general argument that primary sources are helpful to suggest that the use of historical images is “…a useful point of entry for many students, for unlike historical texts – which often present archaic language that children must decode before they can begin to construct meaning – photos, lithographs, cartoons and maps present instantly recognizable features and information, and easily evoke background knowledge that children can begin using in building an interpretation” (p. 3). The study revealed that more research was needed on fostering historical understanding. Structured opportunities to analyze primary sources helped students integrate their skills with historic content (p. 16).
Summary

In examining the literature, it is evident that effective teaching in the history classroom depends upon how a particular school district and the individual teacher value historical thinking. Too often, for various reasons, teachers allow historical thinking and understanding to be supplanted for an ability to memorize dates and identifications. The literature also endorses an instructional approach that routinely employs primary sources, which will foster historical thinking and understanding. The literature recognizes the educational value of Sequential Art in educating students in the study of history as well as other academic disciplines.

Chapter III: Research Design

This project was designed as a qualitative case study. Qualitative research is a method that aims to describe and explain a phenomenon with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible (Merriam, 1998). The case study approach enables researchers to examine the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009). I used a descriptive case study approach to capture what happened during a four-week, high school history unit about World War II that used Sequential Art to support history instruction and learning. A case study, according to Creswell (2007), is an in-depth study of a bounded system based on various data collection sources within a real-life setting. It is an empirical examination of a current phenomenon (Yin, 2009; Merriam, 1998) that seeks to recognize the different meanings and constructs behind individuals’ experiences (Noor, 2008). This descriptive case study was bounded by four weeks within a high school history class, which contained twenty-one tenth graders and one teacher. That teacher used Sequential Art to engage the class in a unit about World War II. The case study employed different data collection tools to capture the
phenomenon and to describe how participants fostered historical understanding through Sequential Art.

**Participants and Site Selection**

This study employed a purposeful sample. The study involved a college preparatory United States History 2 course at a mid-sized regional high school in eastern Massachusetts. King George Regional High School (a pseudonym being used for the school to protect the anonymity of the participants) enrolls students from several adjacent towns. I chose a convenience sampling because of my access to the study of investigation including teachers, students, and observations of lessons using Sequential Art.

According to the school district’s 2012 profile, King George Regional High School had a population of approximately 1,200 students. At the time of the study, four percent of those students received free or reduced lunch. The majority of King George High School’s students are white (95%), with the remaining five percent made up of minorities. The teacher/student ratio is seventeen to one. Approximately 80 teachers serve these students, with all teachers licensed and recognized by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as highly qualified.

The high school’s program of study describes the course as:

…a thorough survey of American history from the westward expansion to the present. Some of the major topics include the Industrial Revolution, the Progressive Era, World Wars I and II, the Roaring Twenties and the Depression and New Deal, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and globalization. This course is designed for students with excellent reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. A variety of materials are used: a standard textbook, a wide range of primary sources, and other outside readings.
Assessments are based on written assignments, tests and quizzes, and term projects. Possible term projects include critical essays, creative writing, book reviews, and a formal research paper (KGRHSPS, 2012, p. 41).

The participating teacher holds a master’s degree in education and majored in history as an undergraduate. As the current department chair, she is respected by the teachers and the administration. Her willingness and enthusiasm to participate in this study evidence her confidence in her ability to use Sequential Art in the classroom. Historical as well as cultural artifacts of Sequential Art were furnished by the researcher and the teacher embedded them into her lesson plans.

Data Collection

As characteristic of qualitative research, several methods were used to collect data regarding the curricular use and impact of using Sequential Art in the classroom (Merriam, 1998). Data collection for this study included two teacher interviews, several student focus groups, recorded observations of lessons, and the examination of student work. The six components of historical understanding – Substantive Concepts, Meta-Concepts, argumentation, historical questions, contextualization, and use of sources (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007) – served as the framework for data collection, the organization of the data into theoretical codes, and are also reflected in the research question that guides the study.

Teacher interviews. The teacher was interviewed prior to teaching the unit, as well as following the completion of the unit, using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C). The semi-structured interview protocol allowed responses to specific questions provided by the interviewer and also allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions depending upon the teacher’s response. The pre-unit interview sought to identify how the teacher identified historical thinking and understanding, as well as the strategies the teacher routinely employed.
In the concluding interview, the researcher posed questions that were designed to consider how Sequential Art fostered historical thinking and understanding.

**Focus groups.** Student focus groups for this study were semi-structured interviews based on a protocol that invited students to explain how they engaged history and primary sources, specifically Sequential Art (Appendix D). Student focus groups had between four to eight students randomly selected depending on their availability at certain times (Creswell, 2007). Student focus groups were held prior to the unit lessons and following the completion of the unit. Notes were taken and student responses were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently member-checked (Stringer, 2007). The semi-structured student focus group protocol allowed responses to specific questions provided by the interviewer and also allowed the interviewer to ask additional questions depending upon students’ response. In the student focus groups, the interviewer sought to identify how the students identified historical thinking and understanding, as well as the best way they learned history. Student focus groups also followed the completion of the unit. The questions posed sought to consider the impact of Sequential Art on historical thinking and understanding.

Each of the student focus group sessions was guided by questions that reflected the six components of historical understanding. The nature of the questions was simple and conversational (1990). The interviewer, through a focus group protocol (appendix D), posed clear and meaningful questions, and offered an opportunity for participants to share their thoughts (1990). Data gathered from student focus groups were examined to see how students fostered historical understanding through Sequential Art.

As the interviewer, I simply posed questions and moderated (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Participants were given an overview of the topic and ground rules for the focus group
were established. To foster a strong comfort level to best insure an environment that was conducive to honest answers, focus groups were held after school or during free time in the students’ classroom.

**Analytical memoranda.** Analytical memoranda are self-reflective memoranda that document and enrich the analytic process and make implicit thoughts explicit to expand the body of data (Creswell, 2007; Ely, Anzul, Freidman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). The composition of analytical memoranda was linked and triggered by observations, interviews, focus groups, and student work. Analytical memoranda gave the researcher a vehicle for personal response to the participants’ narratives (2007). Analytical memoranda were used to reflect on completed observations as well as interactions with participants. Relevant student interaction with Sequential Art connected to historical understanding was placed into analytical bins.

**Observation memoranda.** Observational memoranda are reports of events or interactions directly observed in the field (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The participant observer reduces the obtrusiveness on the natural environment (Krathwohl, 1998). For this study, I produced observation memoranda, drawn from field notes, for each observation conducted (Appendix F). I observed the class a total of eleven times: three times a week over the four-week period during which the group was engaged in the World War II unit. Everything I saw within the classroom was recorded within field notes produced over this four-week period.

The observation notes were later analyzed and organized according to the six components of historical understanding within the formal observation memoranda within thirty-six hours of the class’s conclusion (See Appendix F). A close examination of direct student responses to Sequential Art within the classroom was thickly described with imagery and contextual
knowledge (Richards, 2009). Each observation memorandum captured student action, interaction, and efforts.

**Documents.** Documents are useful and important because they serve to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2009). This category included curriculum documents created by both the teacher and students, such as unit plans and student work. Eventually, evidence of historical thinking and understanding was coded and examples were placed into analytical bins that reflected the six components of historical understanding (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007).

**Data Analysis**

I hoped to better understand how historical thinking and understanding was supported by the curricular use of Sequential Art through the analysis of the data collected. This study sought to describe student interaction with Sequential Art in a tenth-grade United States History classroom. The participants’ language, my notes, classroom observations, and data gathered from a documentary review were used to identify and describe emerging patterns (Corbin, 2008). The six components of historical understanding organized the data to capture what it looked like when students interacted with Sequential Art in the service of historical understanding. I recorded and transcribed both teacher and student input on a daily basis and later member-checked the data. I analyzed by coding the evidence (Saldaña, 2009).

Curriculum documents, analytical memoranda, student work, observation memoranda, teacher interviews, and focus groups served to triangulate the evidence for this study. Triangulation identifies the convergence of different sources of data (Ely, Anzul, Freidman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). The purpose of triangulating the evidence was to authenticate my conclusion about how Sequential Art might contribute to students’ historical thinking and
understanding. I organized the collected data thematically, reflecting the six components of 
historical understanding, which preceded the emergence of coding.

The teacher interview and student focus groups were analyzed through first and second 
coding cycles to identify the emerging themes. First cycle coding was descriptive coding and 
second cycle coding was pattern coding. For example, within the first teacher interview the 
themes that emerged were the skills and concepts of the history; lessons must be formed like a 
story; systemic demands threaten the fostering of historical understanding; instruction must be 
varied routinely. The teacher’s responses then led the researcher to consider pattern coding, the 
second cycle of coding, framed by the six components of historical understanding. Feedback 
gained from the teacher and the students was then deposited into the analytical bins defined by 
the six components of historical understanding.

Coding is a form of qualitative analysis that filters participant actions and feedback into 
words or phrases (Saldaña, 2009). The first cycle of coding was descriptive coding with 
subcategories that utilized phrases relating to the six components of historical understanding. 
This “start list” led to the second cycle of coding (Miles & Hubrman, 1994). The second cycle 
was pattern coding, which contained sub-categories that established an interdependent 
relationship, or identified links, between the six historical components (Saldaña, 2009). Patterns 
and links in student learning were identified by similarities, differences, sequences, frequency, 
corresponding, and causation. These two cycles of coding, in relation to the six components of 
historical understanding, allow us to see the commentary between the students and the teacher in 
relation to historical thinking and understanding. Subsequently, all data were analyzed for 
evidence of students’ engagement in historical thinking and understanding, with themes
developed through an analysis of coding for both the teacher interviews and student focus groups.

**Credibility and Reliability**

Validity, credibility, dependability, and reliability were all qualities that needed to be accounted for in this study (Trochim, 2012). Validity was attended to when the researcher collected and examined multiple sources of evidence (Springer, 2010). Credibility was fostered by results that were believable and dependable. The reliability of the study is dependent on the data collected and the method of analysis (Trochim, 2012).

**Reliability.** The findings that were drawn from the analysis of the data collected in the teacher interviews and student focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The evidence of this study was dependent upon the strategies of data collection and determined its reliability (Trochim, 2012). It also included the analysis of student work and analytical memoranda, described above.

**Dependability.** The study’s dependability was determined by its “reliability” and required defined steps of a research approach, research design, data collection, validity, reliability, protections of human subjects, and a timeline.

The data collected was drawn from teacher interviews and student focus groups. I transcribed recordings and worked to craft a “context” within the student work, observations which were considered in relation to student work and observation memoranda. Data collection, triangulation, and corroboration were essential to the credibility of the final conclusions.

**Validity.** This study addressed validity through the triangulation of several sources of data. In terms of validity threats, I was mainly concerned with gathering credible data and with employing effective methods of analysis (Maxwell, 2005). This study addressed validity by
incorporating multiple sources of data and by creating an evidence chain allowing for the
corroborate the data (Yin, 2009). Thus, the internal validity of this study was attended to by
the triangulation of evidence and member checking (Krathwol, 2004; Richards, 2009). Member
checking was completed by having participants review typed transcripts of student focus groups
and teacher interviews within thirty-six hours of the completed focus group or interview.

As the researcher I needed to accept the view that, “All we require is the possibility of
testing these accounts against the world, giving the phenomena that we’re trying to understand
the chance to prove us wrong” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 106). In conducting this study, it was
necessary for me to recognize the possibility of my own bias: I believed that Sequential Art
could be an effective instructional medium. I mitigated that threat by relying on the research
design, methods of investigation, and the collected evidence.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants of this study were not exposed to any foreseeable risk. After requesting
approval from the building principal, the teachers’ association president, and the district
superintendent, I sought the students’ and guardians’ consent in writing. Students were invited to
participate and were instructed that they would be free to withdraw at any time. Student
participants, with parental permission, were asked to sign a letter of individual consent and
endorsement. Student confidentiality was maintained by coding their identities. I am a former
history teacher and currently the assistant principal at the site school. Students saw my role as
their assistant principal evolve to be a scholar-practitioner within their classroom for four weeks;
my role as a researcher rather than as a disciplinarian was clearly communicated. As the assistant
principal, I reframed how students saw me. For the sake of this study, I was a stealthy observer
and conducted effective focus groups by employing pauses and probes (Stewart & Shamdasani,
1990). I solicited feedback from “experts, dominant talkers, shy participants, and ramblers” (p. 100) by responding through positive body language, humor, and short verbal responses. It was my hope that students would benefit by being exposed to my graduate study experience.

An invitation was given to the prospective teacher (Appendix A). I provided the teacher an individual consent and disclosure form as well (Appendix B). King George Regional High School is the pseudonym applied to the actual school where this study took place. Because student responses formed much of the data of this study, students were also assigned pseudonyms. I planned to archive observation notes and transcripts for five years. Upon request, I would make the transcripts available to those who were interested. I alerted my academic advisor, Dr. Christopher Unger, to any concerns. The validity and reliability of this study were maintained while treating participants respectfully.

**Summary**

It was the goal of this study to document and then examine what it looked like when Sequential Art was used to support students’ historical thinking and understanding in a history classroom, and then to examine its impact on students’ learning through the perspectives of the teacher and students. To that end, several sources of evidence were collected, including student work, the recording of classroom observations, reflective memoranda, teacher interviews, and student focus groups. Analysis includes the review and coding of student work, the classroom observations, as well as the teacher interviews and student focus groups.

**Chapter IV: Research Findings**

Chapter IV offers the key findings of this case study, conducted over four weeks, investigating how students examine World War II through the curricular use of Sequential Art. Through eleven observations, the cooperating teacher, Ms. Smith, attempted to incorporate Sequential Art in meaningful ways within the teaching of history. The researcher conducted four
focus groups with students prior to the observed units of instruction and four focus groups with students afterward. In addition to collecting student work and curriculum documents, pre-and-post teacher interviews were conducted. This presentation and analysis of the study is reviewed through the lens of the six components of historical understanding and the themes that surfaced during the observations. All data collecting efforts were guided by the research question:

*How does the use of Sequential Art support students in employing the six components of historical thinking and understanding as observed in the classroom, reported by the teacher and determined through student focus groups and work products?*

**Study Context**

This qualitative case study was designed to consider the educational value of Sequential Art through the lens of historical understanding. The participants of this study, one Social Studies teacher and twenty-one sophomores, were responsible for exploring United States History from 1860 through the present in one academic year. It is mandated by both the school and the state that students not just examine a time period but grasp the skills and concepts of history. This study sought to consider whether the use of Sequential Art led to students being more inclined to think like historians rather than memorizing facts and figures.

To consider the premise of whether Sequential Art can foster the six components of historical understanding, King George Regional High School, in eastern Massachusetts, was selected to provide a purposeful sampling. Over a period of approximately four weeks, the teacher incorporated Sequential Art samples within her instruction as a supplement to the routine curriculum. Data were collected through various instruments by the researcher. The first instrument was a pre-unit teacher interview, which occurred before the focus groups and observations. That interview was followed by four student focus groups, which were followed
by eleven observations. Those observations were followed by a second series of four student focus groups. The final instrument used was a second teacher interview.

**Pre-Unit Teacher Interview Themes**

The pre-unit teacher interview took place with the cooperating teacher prior to the classroom observations and student focus groups. Table 1 presents the themes derived from a close analysis of the pre-unit interview with the teacher. Before observing her class, the researcher interviewed Ms. Smith. In that interview we discussed her views on what is essential for students to be successful in history, her instructional approach, the systemic challenges, and the challenges of teaching.

**Table 1**

*Views of the cooperating teacher during the pre-unit interview.*

- History teachers must value skills and concepts associated with an understanding of history as well as the subject content.
- For students to fully understand, history lessons should be formulated like a story.
- The resources of the school and the demands of pacing created by the state-mandated curriculum create a climate that allows history’s skills and concepts to be overlooked.
- Teachers must have the capacity to vary their instruction with different class levels.

In the following section, each of these views will be presented and discussed. **History teachers must value the skills and concepts associated with an understanding of history as well as the subject content.** The term “substantive concepts” refers to how historians identify historic figures, list dates, and distinguish eras (e.g., vocabulary coverage). In fostering Substantive Concepts among her students, Ms. Smith is selective in the amount of material she
delivers because she does not want to inundate them and ultimately lose their attention. In terms of sub-concepts, Ms. Smith explained, “What I do is try and keep the amount of those [facts] down. I try not to overwhelm them. For example, we just went into the Great Depression and I said, ‘There will be five dates you will need to know. You will learn about a lot more but there are five dates you will need to know. There are five dates you absolutely need to know.’” As a teacher, she explained, “I think it is picking and choosing what is important and then emphasizing them constantly throughout the lesson. And throughout that day but throughout the entire chapter and going back to it. I would say, ‘When did World War I end, when was the armistice date?’ Stuff like that.”

To help students frame their understanding in terms of Meta-Concepts, she explained, “I organize history like a story.” Touching on the historians’ skills, she said, “We link the housing crash with the stock market crash of ’29 as far as risky loans by banks to people who should not have had them. We connect the current recession to the Great Depression.” She continued, “When the opportunity is there for argument-based discussion, yes, I do. The time frame makes it difficult. Class discussion is important but it cannot dominate [our schedule] because according to the framework we are supposed to go [from 1865] to 2001 if not present day. It is very difficult. We work constantly, day-in and day-out, and I struggle to get there.”

In regard to historical questions, Ms. Smith said, “…when they study wars there are tons of questions. Now the Gilded Age, not too many questions. Even with the Progressive Era, they had a good many questions, which is interesting. They like Teddy Roosevelt. They are all hooked on drama, their own drama or drama in general.”

As far as contextualization, she claimed, “That is tough. You do it by picking out need-to-know facts and letting go some of the other things. For instance with the stock market crash,
that is a hard concept when you first explain it to them. They ask, ‘Where is the money? Where did it go?’ What we do – they all have i-phones – I have them take out their phones and we’ll examine stocks.” In an effort to balance skills and concepts with content she explained, “We need to emphasize the content of history as well as the skills and concepts of history. The skills and concepts are important as well because those can be used over their lives.”

**For students to fully understand history, history lessons should be formulated like a story.** Ms. Smith explained, “You have to remember it is technically a survey course; it is touching upon it.” In her instructional approach, she explains, “I organize history like a story; … I try to formulate it more like a story so they understand – and not just facts – so they understand.” Furthermore, she added, “I try to bring in modern day events; I try to link current events to events of the past with news articles, Yahoo clips, and news clips.” History teachers, Ms. Smith concluded, must diversify their instructional approach routinely. To diversify that approach, Ms. Smith’s students routinely engage primary sources that showcase visuals. She explained that, “We have done a lot with political cartoons; we have done a lot with just photographs in general.” Smith explained that all of her PowerPoint presentations contain images as well as words.

**The resources of the school and the demands of pacing created by the state-mandated curriculum create a climate that allows history’s skills and concepts to be overlooked.** The opportunities to include primary sources within lessons are limited because of the need to cover so much material in a limited amount of time. The pressure of pacing is compounded with the lack of textbooks. She explained that for one hundred-ten students, she had thirty books: “To provide books for every student is eighty-five dollars each. You’re talking $8,500, easy.” Addressing this challenge, she explained, “We’re trying to get a new set of
Modern World History books, because we haven’t had them since 1992, and we’re looking at $40,000 for one hundred-twenty students.” These circumstances impact her instructional approach.

**Teachers must have the capacity to vary their instruction with different class levels.**

Ms. Smith explained, “I think history is one big story so that is why I teach it the way I do.” Ms. Smith explained that the instructional strategy she employs depends on how many students are in her class and what her resources are. She explained that because of large numbers, group work is not a routine option; if the class is small, group work becomes more of an option. This year, Ms. Smith’s teaching loads were three classes of thirty-four students each, one class of twenty-one students, and one class of ten students. The class containing ten students was a lower level class that allowed for the routine use of student-centered learning. Because of this challenge in numbers, Ms. Smith said, “I am a different person three times a day. I teach my Essential College Preparation kids a certain way, I teach my College Preparation kids another way, and I teach my Psychology seniors another way because I have Essential College Preparation, College Prep, and Honors.” While Ms. Smith identified some of the challenges in teaching history within her school, students have their own challenges in learning.

**Pre-unit Focus Group Themes**

The pre-unit focus groups were conducted before the classroom observations. Table 2 presents the themes derived from the student focus groups prior to the unit observed.

**Table 2**

*Themes in relationship to the data gained through the first session of student focus groups.*

- History is not a favorite subject among most students.

- Students prefer lessons that avoid textbooks and lectures.
• The use of primary sources appeals to students.

• Students appreciate the incorporation of visuals within classroom presentation.

• Teachers who “mix-up” their style are preferred.

**History is not a favorite subject among most students.** Most students did not identify history as their favorite subject. For instance, Alex explained:

I like physics because I understand it more than most stuff. I am better with things that I can physically see and think about and that I can actually have something that makes sense to me.

In a similar vein another student, Haley, added:

My favorite subject is either Math or Bio. Math because I find it easy, it is my best subject, and Bio –I don’t know – I really like my teacher this year. I like my biology teacher because she gets really deep into things and explains things. At the beginning of the year, she told us her students do well on big tests like MCAS. I find that to be true, she is just really good at teaching. Right now she is teaching about mitosis and meiosis and she gives us pictures of it and says it’s “the visual [that] helps me.”

History was not identified by most students as their favorite subject and they often preferred those topics that were taught in an active, rather than passive, fashion.

**Students prefer lessons that avoid textbooks and lectures.** Answers varied when students were asked to identify their favorite ways to learn history. Sam explained that, “I like doing maps, doing World War I, where troops intertwine, I like the visuals …” Cathy liked, “Reading the words and the pictures, and seeing what they went through…” Julie added, “I like the power-points, it helps me process…” Haley insisted that, “I like group work. I do not really
like when a teacher stands up in the front and just talks and talks. I feel most students will ‘zone-out’ and most students will get lost. This year, history is exciting. My current history teacher goes through everything and explains it really well.” Alex said, “I like group work a lot more. Our current teacher will give us notes but she also gives us visuals, which really helps. Group work is good because if you do not get it, you can ask others. If you are working alone, you are lost. When a teacher is into it, my enthusiasm goes up. When the teacher is energetic, the teacher’s credibility goes up.” David said, “I like lessons when the teacher makes it fun and turns it into a game.” There is clearly a desire by students for teachers to employ a variety of learning strategies.

The use of primary sources appeals to students. A primary source is a first-hand account or artifact, which is pertinent to the historical question being asked. In terms of primary sources, Dan explained, “It is something different, it makes things interesting, it puts you in their shoes…it’s different than a textbook.” Ray preferred multiples sources, saying, “I see history as one long story with lots of characters and tons of plots. I like reading and stuff like that so that usually helps me. I prefer to do it on my own, that usually helps me.” Haley followed by saying, “It helps to see the primary source [rather] than [to] just read about it.” Max pointed out, in reference to primary sources, “You can be biased; you need to see both sides, like if you went to England to read about the Revolutionary War it would be so different than here…” Opportunities to see various viewpoints through the use of primary sources allow students to interpret history for themselves.

Students appreciate the incorporation of visuals within classroom presentation. Ms. Smith believed that the best artifacts for her students were the ones that showcase visuals. In
reference to visuals, Haley explained, “I like to see pictures and visuals. Like when we were learning about World War I and I saw all the trenches, that helped me learn.”

Alex shared, “I have always liked figuring things out that are physically there. That is just the way I learn.” Hugh said, “I mean, I guess it is more of the fact that you [get] to see and touch something rather than just deal with black words on a page.” Alex claimed, “I like visuals which are detailed. I like graphs, which offer a visual measurement. When graphs showed me, last year, the contrast between those who died in the Civil War compared with those who died in all of America’s other wars. It was ten times the rest of them.” David concurred, “Pretty much the same as them. I like pictures, videos …pretty much anything I can see. A film on the sinking of the Lusitania that I saw in middle school is an example that helped me better understand World War I.”

**Teachers who “mix-up” their style are preferred.** Students offered meaningful opinions relating to what teaching styles work best. Cathy said, “I hate lecturing and heavy use of the textbook because I zone out; I like the hands-on stuff because it is a lot easier to learn it…” Jill commented that, “Textbooks and lectures don’t work for me. When I have to read the textbook I never actually read it, I just skim it; if it is a PowerPoint, I can pay attention but if it is a lecture it is hard to remember.” Max related to Jill’s comment, saying, “If the teacher relies too much on the textbooks it is a bad thing. Multiple things help me learn.” Sam said, “I feel the same way; if I am in a group I feel more involved with it I tend to pay attention.” Winston explained, “Because if there is not a strategy, I am not a fan of it and I do not want to learn – if it is straight-out lecture – I do not want to learn.” Students were then asked if primary sources are helpful in learning history. The use of primary sources appeals to students in contrast to what they read in their textbooks.
Nathan said, “Group work works for me because I like interacting with other people – it’s easier. I just learn better by interacting with other people. Working in partners helps me.” Robert said, “My favorite way to learn is to get up and move. With lecturing, I do my best to pay attention but I eventually zone-out.” He explained, “It kind of depends on the subject. For history I’d suggest something about talking back and forth I guess. For Science, like more visual; For Math, visual; For English, kind of lectures – talking back and forth, a little of both; for Gym, like interactive; Foreign language, you’d have to use notes and lectures.” Those teachers who routinely alternate their instructional approach are preferred by students because they are more likely to raise student stimulation.

In addressing the question, “If you were our school’s principal, what strategies might you insist teachers use?” Alex summed up the position of most participants when he said, “I agree; a combination works best. Teachers should avoid ‘chalk and talk.’ Some teachers still use ‘chalk and talk.’ I can’t focus on what the teacher is saying and take notes at once; it is either one or the other for me.” Most students preferred any type of instructional strategy to the lecture; the typical lecture is not aligned with the learning style of most of the students within this study.

**Classroom Observations**

Eleven observations were conducted over four weeks that collected data from the researcher’s observations and student work. Table 3 contains a framework that identifies the topic, the activities, and the most prominent historical component of each. The observations show that Sequential Art can make history meaningful for students. While it is evident that Sequential Art appeals to most learning styles and is a means for fostering historical thinking and understanding, the key finding is that students demonstrated the six components of historical understanding within the observations.
Table 3

*A framework of the eleven observations that outlines the major topic, activity, and most prominent theme of each lesson.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Major Topic</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Most Prominent Component or Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fascism &amp; Communism</td>
<td>Students examine a two-page comic strip on how Superman would end World War II (Siegel &amp; Schuster, 1942).</td>
<td>Historical Questions</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Propaganda, Mobilization, &amp; Ideology</td>
<td>Students examine and categorize various comic book propaganda covers.</td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Eastern Front</td>
<td>Students examine and discuss six different propaganda cartoons (Geisel, 1999).</td>
<td>Use of Sources</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>The D-Day Amphibious Landing</td>
<td>Students read a story that details some of the challenges of the amphibious invasion (Severin, 1952).</td>
<td>Historical Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>D-Day Para-Troopers Paracute into Normandy</td>
<td>Students read a story that details the challenges of being a Para-Trooper during D-Day.</td>
<td>Argumentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Demolition “Frogmen” at D-Day</td>
<td>Students read a story that illustrates the challenges of preparing for the landing of the main invasion force at D-Day.</td>
<td>Argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The Holocaust</td>
<td>Students examine two different two-page excerpts from Maus that showcase one survivor’s experiences.</td>
<td>Use of Sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Propaganda &amp; Racism</td>
<td>Students examine several comic book covers and consider whether they are acceptable by today’s standards and why they were acceptable in the past.</td>
<td>Argumentation</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Island Hopping</td>
<td>Students read and discuss a story that considers the fighting on</td>
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<td>#</td>
<td>Topic</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Jungle Warfare</td>
<td>Students read and discuss the nature of Jungle warfare on the island of Saipan (Wood, 1953).</td>
<td>Substantive Concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Nagasaki</td>
<td>Students read and discuss a packet on the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Japan (Davis, 1953).</td>
<td>Contextualization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Observation 1.** In the first observation, Ms. Smith asked students to examine a two-page comic vignette that considers the hypothetical interaction of Superman, the League of Nations, Joseph Stalin, and Adolf Hitler (See Figure 5). In reference to the Sequential Art sampling (Siegel & Schuster, 1940), Ethel asked Jill, “…you know about that [League of Nations?]”, which led Ross to explain, “They did not get involved in the League of Nations because of World War I.” Al asked, “Was Russia a part of the League of Nations?” Commenting on the comic strip, Ethel observed, “Oh, [was it] because the American (sic) was not a part of the League of Nations?” While students do not frequently pose the most complete historical questions, this piece of Sequential Art triggered meaningful questions.

Later, the teacher asked, “What does Superman represent? What does Hitler represent?” Max answered that, “Hitler represented fascism.” Helena followed by saying, “Stalin represented Communism.” Ethel further explained that, “They did not want to be pulled into any other wars that were far away.” Ms. Smith countered Ethel’s answer, asking, “Why does that hurt the United States?” Max answered with, “…because [the League of Nations] doesn’t use the power of the United States.” This sampling shows that students do offer informed historical questions.

That same piece of Sequential Art (Siegel & Schuster, 1940) positioned Ms. Smith to ask, “How did America go from seeing Stalin as a villain in 1940 to a friend in 1942?” Liam responded with, “Hitler did that for the time being,” while Ray insisted America and Russia by 1942 were...
motivated by “…a common enemy.” Joe observed, “Stalin was involved with Hitler and [the] non-aggression pact…” Through this interactive discussion students were able to contextualize how the alliance between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany dissolved.

![Figure 5. Superman. © DC Comics.](image)

**Observation 2.** In the second observation, Ms. Smith demonstrates that the use of Substantive Concepts is essential for the employment of Meta-Concepts. In other words, the capacity to list terms and dates (Substantive Concepts) positions historians to begin to explain, with rationale, historic events (Meta-Concepts). In observation two, she divided the class into five different groups; each group was given seven comic book covers published during World War II. The lesson plan required students to categorize these covers under the labels of sabotage, mobilization, and political ideology. They were then asked to offer a rationale for their categorization.
Group 1, made up of Ray, Winston, Joe, and Alex, placed Cat Man #19 (Figure 6) under political ideology because it is “promoting war bonds” and Thrilling Comics #50 (Figure 7) under mobilization because “…it shows [a] soldier armed and ready for war…”
The group slotted Wonder Comics #4 (Figure 8), Wonder Comics #5 (Figure 9), and Superman #17 (Figure 10) under the sabotage category. Wonder Comics #4 shows a hero “…stopping Japanese from sending messages…”

Figure 8. Wonder Comics #4. © DC Comics

Wonder Comics #5 portrays a hero “…stopping Japanese P.O.W. camp…”

Figure 9. Wonder Comics #5. © DC Comics.
Superman #17 shows Superman “…stopping Hitler and the Japanese…” Each group was to discuss their Sequential Art sample and place it in one of three categories. By depositing comic book covers into various categories, students showed that they could use a source in an informed fashion.

In observation two, students showed they could categorize Sequential Art samples by either the category of mobilization or sabotage. Ross, in group 2, slotted Wonder Comics # 4 into the category of sabotage, because of “the codebook.” Peter observed, “The Japanese are being evil in this picture.” Later, Peter said, “I like this activity, can we have more?” The ability of students to identify and speak of meaningful themes reflects an ability to find meaning in different sources.

In reference to Superman #17 (Figure 10) Jill said, “Superman is attack[ing] the Japanese man and Hitler so it would be political ideology.” The teacher responded with, “Good. What did you put for Catman #19?” Ethel said, “I put mobilization because I was looking at the ‘buy war
bonds’ ad.” Joe followed with, “I put it under sabotage because the Catman is punching the leader of the Axis powers…” Commenting on Wonder Comics #4, Alex said, “We chose sabotage because the character is stopping a Japanese man from sending a message [in code on the radio] where it said code book.” In reference to Wonder Comics #5, Ethel said, “It belongs under sabotage because the Grim Reaper is fighting the Japanese in order to save the Americans from the civilian camps [where the Japanese] use … weapons and …burn people.” Andrea commented on Superman #12. She asked Ms. Smith if she could create her own category. She saw Superman #12 (Figure 11) as being more nationalistic.

![Superman #12](https://example.com/superman12.png)

**Figure 11.** Superman #12. © DC Comics.

Andrea said, “I used nationalism because I thought it shows the country’s pride working together, ‘arm in arm’ with Superman.” Jim, in reference to Superman #17, explained, “Superman is stopping the German and the Japanese [Hitler and Tojo] so I would place it under sabotage or mobilization.”
Students placed Batman #18 (Figure 12) under sabotage. They explained, “He blew up dynamite by the Japanese, Hitler, and Mussolini. Batman has a pleased look on his face and he is walking away.” In delineating the different political ideologies, students demonstrated a capacity to employ Meta-Concepts.

Students placed Cat Man #19 under sabotage, “…because they are punching the leaders of the alliances.” Wonder Comics #4 is under sabotage because having “…the code book is an act of sabotage.” Under mobilization, they placed Cat Man #19 and Batman #18. Their rationale for placing Cat Man #19 under mobilization was, “…because on the cover it says ‘buy war bonds.’ So they can build up an army for the U.S.” Batman #18 was also placed under mobilization “because it says, ‘buy war bonds and stamps’ to support the war.” They also placed Batman #18 and Superman #17 under political ideology. Batman #18 was also placed under political ideology, “…because the good guys, democracy, is alive after the bomb wave, and others are dying.” Superman #17 was placed under political ideology, “…because he is destroying Germany and Japan’s government.” Each of these groups was able to employ
Substantive Concepts to contextualize the topic reflected in the artifacts while exhibiting Meta-Concepts and forming an argument to appropriately position each artifact.

Winston observed, “Superman is stopping these two powers and putting an end to it. Superman is more democratic than the other two.” Cathy brought up Batman #18, saying, “I would put it under mobilization or political ideology. I chose mobilization because of the request to buy war bonds and political ideology because [Batman] is blowing up political ideologies…” In these observations, students demonstrated a capacity for contextualization (connecting the past to the present), displayed Meta-Concepts (asserted cause within history), and offered argumentation (formed arguments based on the evidence). Students linked the past event to the present and offered compassion to those portrayed in negative light.

**Observation 3.** In observation three, the lesson was centered on propaganda cartoons crafted by Theodore Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss. Divided into groups of four, the class was asked to examine and then connect the different themes of the cartoons. Students displayed a capacity, through the Sequential Art samples, to contextualize the topic, engage the historical question, and form an argument. Ms. Smith observed, “It shows that Hitler kept saying to his people: trust me, I’ll get you through this. Can you trust Hitler?” Ross answered, “No” (Geisel, 1999, p. 16). Haley observed, referring to her political cartoon with Stalin, Tojo, and Hitler (Geisel, 1999, p. 166), that, “They are all tangled together by pacts.” The teacher then asked, “Who was successful at Stalingrad?” Ross answered, “The Soviets” (Geisel, 1999, p. 31). Ms. Smith then asked, “Why was Stalingrad so important?” Robert answered, “Because it was close to the oil fields,” while Ross, recognizing the German motive, said, “It was important because it was named after Stalin” (Geisel, 1999, p. 113). Students were able to engage historical questions
through Sequential Art, examining different cartoons while offering meaningful interpretations; students showed that they could interpret sources independently.

Continuing, students examined and discussed their thoughts on the cartoons while I moved around the room to record my observations. Within group 5, in referring to her political cartoon, Ethel was amused that Hitler was portrayed as a “taxidermist” (Geisel, 1999, p. 170). Jane recognized that the displayed heads of animals, hung on the walls, were representative of nations the Nazis conquered. In fact, she said, “He is taking over all those places.” In their discussion, the group was not sure if the character portraying Russia was a large cat or a bear. They compromised by concluding it was a large bear-cat. Offering his own interpretation, Joe observed, “Russia is a big bear that makes [Hitler] struggle.” Ethel added, “Italy looks like it has been run over; it looks like road kill.” She added further, “The bear is alive [and] has a mean smile; it’s clawing the floor.” She said the bear-cat’s face was “ferocious and sinister.” Joe countered, “This is the first country that Hitler had trouble with.” This testimony by the observer shows the students corroborating their understanding with one another’s interpretation of the source. In discussing groups, students displayed an ability to offer their interpretations of the artifact to one another.

Ray observed that his cartoon “shows Hitler walking on top of dead Nazis through Russia to get to oil wells” (Minear, 1999, p.170). From this he concluded, “As long as Hitler gets what he wants, he doesn’t care what happens to people – even his own people” (Geisel, 1999, p. 113). Nick, from group 2, referenced his cartoon (Geisel, 1999, p. 166) and described it as Hitler, Stalin, and Tojo being tied together by non-aggression pacts, but “…it is Hitler pulling the strings; it seems like Hitler is about to attack.” Joe described group 5’s cartoon (Geisel, 1999, p. 170) to the class, saying, “Hitler is a taxidermist who is mounting things (trophies) on his wall
but the Battle of Stalingrad and Russia are proving much harder. The bear-cat is pulling back with a sinister look.” Hugh, from group 4, said, “Hitler is riding a sled pulled by a little dog in the front. He is retreating and it ends badly” (Geisel, 1999, p. 31). These observations show students interpreting the metaphors within the pieces of Sequential Art. With each of these four cartoons, students employed not only Substantive Concepts (elementary history) but Meta-Concepts (the connection of various historical movements), and eventually engaged historical questions.

**Observation 4.** In observation four, students were asked to read the comic book vignette entitled D-Day. Students were then asked to answer four questions relating to the invasion. Student responses demonstrated a capacity to pose and engage in historical questions after examining artifacts that contextualize the topic. In examining the Sequential Art vignette (Severin, 1952), Ms. Smith asked, “What does vulnerable mean?” She then posed this question to the larger class, where Haley answered, “Vulnerable means you are in a weaker position than the other person.” With enthusiasm, Haley continued, “They need to take the cliff or other soldiers will die.” Haley then explained to Andrea, “The big difference is the cliff.” Joe shared the observation, “So they have higher ground and have an advantage over the Germans.” Haley then added, “They were vulnerable, they had to climb the cliff while they were being shot at.” Max then stated a question, “He was slipping [off the cliff], what motivated these guys?” Robert then observed, “If they didn’t take Pointe Du Hoe lots of other soldiers were at risk.” In this sampling, students’ responses demonstrated that they successfully understood and engaged historical questions.

In the fourth observation (Severin, 1951), Substantive Concepts are again linked to elements of Meta-Concepts. An example of this can be seen when Ms. Smith introduced the

After introducing students to these terms, Ms. Smith asked, “Where is Normandy?” All students identified Normandy as a province on the coast of France where D-Day happened. By managing these different terms that relate to D-Day, students were demonstrating their competency in relation to Substantive Concepts. Their capacity for identifying Substantive Concepts was also displayed in observation five. For example, Ethel said, “…the first day, there were over 1000 American casualties.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What were people expecting of Eisenhower; did he consider retreating?” Robert responded, “…it was costly but it was working.” She then challenged students with the question, “What was the purpose of the hedgehogs?” Recognizing the term for specific traps, called hedgehogs, Joe responded with, “They were so the tanks could not get on the beach.”

If students are able to empathize with the past through their answers, they have effectively contextualized the event through the source. After reading the sample of Sequential Art entitled “Devil in the Baggy Pants” (Wood, 1951), students offered some meaningful responses. In addressing the question, “Were the Rangers unusually vulnerable in assaulting the cliff?” Jane said, “Yes, because they have to climb the cliff with German[s] shooting at them the whole time,” while Al said, “Yes. They were getting seasick on the ride there [and] climb[ed] up the hill [with] bad weather.” Haley said, “Whoever has Pointe Du Hoe has the advantage because they have the high ground.” Winston observed, “Yes. Their hands were not free to hold a gun, so they were easy targets.” The next question students were confronted with was, “What motivated
these soldiers to attempt such a feat?” Jane said, “To save their country from the Germans and protect America. Also to save other soldiers’ lives,” while Andrea said, “So, they could save their country, because if they didn’t then everybody on the beach would be vulnerable.” Al followed with, “They were willing to die for their country. The others storming Omaha would have died if they did not take the cliff. These answers again show empathy, a type of contextualization; by offering rational historical assertions, the students were interpreting the sources of Sequential Art. The more sources students examined, the more they were able to entertain alternative perspectives.

Observation 5. In observation five, Ms. Smith required students to read the comic book packet and answer four questions relating to Para-troopers jumping into the Normandy countryside. Students identified with the main character and displayed historical empathy. Students also showed a capacity for forming argumentation. Robert commented that, “Sergeant Purvie was the real coward while [the guy he picked on] ‘Duck Butt’ was the real hero.” Pivoting from that student’s comment, Ms. Smith asked, “Do you ever know who is going to be the coward? Who do you want with you?” Winston said, “I want Duck Butt.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What defines a hero or a coward?” Ray answered, “Probably if they are willing to die.” Max added, “Running away from danger when you are needed.” Students demonstrated an ability to contextualize the artifact under examination and form an argument from their interpretation of the artifact.

In looking at the packet entitled “Devil in the Baggy pants,” Ms. Smith said, “You are going to read up and down the rows like before but with more ‘oomph!’” Students giggled and there was then a focused silence as students read the panels. One of comic panels had dialogue in German and the teacher excused the student from trying to annunciate that dialogue bubble.
Upon concluding the packet, Ms. Smith focused on the issue of cowardice. After reading the vignette, Ms. Smith explained that students came to understand Sergeant Purvie frequently hazed one soldier he nicknamed “Duck Butt.” Within the story arc, Duck Butt proved himself to be the real hero while Sergeant Purvie showed himself to be less than a hero.

Ms. Smith then asked, “In looking at both the film and the comic book packet, what did you see?” Liam responded, “The movie is more, more brutal. The comics make it look like less of a bad thing because it is propaganda.” Dan then asked, “Paratroopers are soldiers dropped from planes, right?” The teacher explained that was correct. Because students had to make meaning out of the artifacts and offer a rationale, they showed historical understanding.

**Observation 6.** In observation six the teacher guided the students through their reading of the comic book packet entitled “Devils in the Baggy Pants” (Kubert, 1953), followed by five questions. Immediately upon completing the reading, Alex offered an argument when he responded, “The only reason D-Day could happen was with those frogmen.” From this packet, the class became informed as to the role of the “frogmen” who reconnoitered beaches on the Normandy Coast in preparation for D-Day. The teacher explained that this reminds us of the previous packet, “Devil in the Baggy Pants,” about the need for heroes like “Duck Butt.” Students, as a result of the vignette, offered their own interpretation. By offering an interpretation, students showed a firm grasp of D-Day. As reflected in their discussion and tone, students were attentive and focused.

Students read the comic book packet called “Tide.” The teacher then asked students, “Why do they have to go to France first?” Ross answered, “It was what they had to do, they had to deal with [not only Normandy] France but also Vichy’ France in the south.” Ms. Smith said, “In general, France – including Vichy’, France – was conquered. The breakout of Normandy –
to liberate France – was built up through [combat in] North Africa, Italy, and eventually leads us to Germany. It is there that we will learn about the Battle of the Bulge.” Following up, Ms. Smith asked students, “Who is coming from the east?” Ross answered, “Russia!” Ms. Smith said, “Okay, good, define casualties for me.” Al said, “The dead and wounded.” Ross said, “Those people who are not going to be helping much.” Dan said, “Eisenhower could not turn back.” It was only after their examination of the artifacts that students realized that D-Day was a turning point in the war.

The teacher asked, “What was the purpose of the hedgehogs?” Jane responded, “So the boats couldn’t get on the shore.” The teacher said, “Good, anyone else?” Then Joe said, “To keep people from landing and getting on the beach.” Liam said, “The Cathy used them for cover.” Helena asked, “What does fortify mean?” Ms. Smith called on Ross, who answered, “Fortify means to make stronger.” By 10:15, all students were working on their written responses to the answers. Ethel asked for clarification on question #2 and the teacher restated it. Then the teacher asked Joe to help her. He said, “The frogmen blew up the hedgehogs. They had to get the hedgehogs out of the way.” Alex observed that, “The only reason D-Day could happen was with those frogmen.” These arguments, which display historical understanding, were a result of the students examining the Sequential Art.

Observation 7. In the seventh observation, Ms. Smith had students read two excerpts and then consider the value of human rights. An example of this could be how the Jews were persecuted by the Nazi regime. The teacher pointed out that the characters were being executed (Spiegelman, 1997). In classroom discussion, Jill explained, “They were selling things that were unregistered to the Jews. By doing so, they were going against Nazi orders and were helping Jews so they were hanged.” Haley said, “The mice symbolize Jews and the cats symbolize the
Nazis. The cats are more powerful than the mice, and in real life cats kill mice.” It was only after students read the excerpt of *Maus* that they struggled with the intolerance of the Nazis for the Jews.

In the seventh observation, students considered another Sequential Art sample (Figure 13), which led Peter to ask, “What does ‘segregate’ mean? The teacher explained that to segregate was to separate people and this was a step in the eventual mass killing of the Jews. Peter responded, “So, they wanted them to suffer?” And Ray asked, “So they cannot have kids because of segregation?” Ray then recognized the implied metaphor, saying, “Ah! Cats eat mice!” The second excerpt from another Sequential Art sample (Spiegelman, 1997, pp. 84-85) caused Jill to ask, “What is genocide?” Andrea observed that the pictures showed, “[A] kilo of sugar for a person?!” (Figure 13).

*Figure 13. Maus.* Copyright by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House.
She was referencing a sign that offered one kilo of sugar for any unregistered Jew turned in. This led Andrea to conclude, “In the eyes of the Nazis, they were worthless.” Ethel held up both excerpts next to the other and asked, “What do the coupons do?” She noted that to purchase and sell goods without coupons was “going against Nazi authority by selling on the black market.” This observation attests to the capacity of students to employ Meta-Concepts in connecting the primary source to their understanding by being able to analyze the policies of the Nazis toward the Jews.

Nathan then observed (Figure 14), “It’s all about power. Cats have all the power.” Max said, “From the Nazi perspective, mice are dirty street things, messy.” Jim observed,

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**Figure 14. Maus.** Copyright by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House.
“They were trading without coupons and were hung for a week to set an example.” Then Ray insisted that, “…people are not willing to subordinate themselves to authority today as much as then.” As displayed here, students were able to make meaning out of the samples of Sequential Art by treating them as a primary source. Here, because of their analysis of the Sequential Art, students were able to frame the perspective of the Nazis toward the Jews and contrast it with values of today.

The written responses from observation seven were as informative as their interactive discussion. After examining a Sequential Art excerpt from *Maus* the first written question students were confronted with was, “What is the concrete value, in the eyes of the Nazis, of an unregistered Jew?” Andrea said they were worthless in the eyes of the Nazis, equal to only one kilo of sugar. Jim said, “You get one kilo of sugar for every unregistered Jew you find.” Ethel responded, “They’re worthless; they cost next to nothing.” The interpretation of these sources happened through the methods of the historian (Meta-Concepts). Students displayed a sense of righteous indignation in how the Jews were victimized by the Nazis.

In observation seven (Figures 13 & 14), students engaged the question, “By segregating spouses from one another, as portrayed in this excerpt, how are the Nazis supporting their policy of genocide?” After examining excerpts from *Maus*, Cathy said, “If two Jews were in love, the Nazis would most likely kill one or both to make them suffer, and they won’t populate more Jews.” Winston answered, “Attempting to stop pregnancies and more Jew[ish] children.” Al responded with, “The mice are getting killed and starved to death.” With this sample of Sequential Art, students employed contextualization as well as Meta-Concepts because they asserted a rationale that showed contextual understanding.
In their discussion during observation eight, students were stimulated by the various comic book covers. Ray asked, “What is the 7th war loan?” Alex answered, “I guess that is how they paid for the war” (Sprang, 1943). Max thought that the theme of the cover was reasonable and acceptable by the standards of today and of the past. About that same cover, Ethel said, “These giant superheroes are walking toward Tokyo and it is about mobilization because America has to get the work done. It is about inspiring [Americans] and defeating Japan” (Geisel, 1999, p. 163). Haley said, “To say: ‘Superman says it is okay to slap a Jap’ is insulting” (Figure 11). Robert said, “It is unacceptable today. It is racist and offensive and could make people think it is okay to be racist” (Siegel & Schuster, 1943). The collective outrage by students demonstrated their ability to compare the values of their generation with values of a past generation.

Observation 8. In observation eight, Ms. Smith asked students to consider several comic book covers and organize them by theme while offering a rationale. Those themes were mobilization and propaganda. The first question was, “How might these themes be unacceptable today?” Joe answered (Raboy, 1942), “It is unacceptable because they are destroying the city of Tokyo. It is acceptable during the time of the war in promoting war.” Ross replied, “They use racist terms towards [the] Japanese people and promote violence against them” (Siegel & Schuster, 1943).

Jill commented, “Mobilization looking for volunteers for [the] atomic bomb test [is] unacceptable because it glorifies dropping the atomic bomb on Japan” (Siegel & Schuster, 1943). She was disappointed by the character “Pyro man holding the atomic bomb” (Schomburg, 1946). Robert said, “It talks about completely destroying innocent people.” Jim offered his interpretation, saying, “They are using derogatory terms that would be very offensive today. The term “Jap” would be considered racist today” (Figure 15). In using these sources, students
displayed a strong sense of self-efficacy. They answered questions with confidence and with sound analytical logic.

Figure 15. Action Comics #58 © DC Comics.

The second question asked in observation eight was, “How do these artifacts insult, inspire, or suggest strategy? Explain.” Haley argued, “It is racist and rude towards the Japanese. ‘Japs’ was a word used badly during the war.” Robert said, “It makes people think it’s okay to be racist towards Japanese.” It is meaningful that students articulate the distinction between the values of World War II and today. This evidence attests to the capacity of students to offer historical empathy by questioning the dehumanizing nature of this propaganda. Robert then said, “The character named Pyro-man dropping an atomic bomb at any time is unacceptable” (Figure 16). Jill said, “It is unacceptable because it showing how to use the A-bomb and making light of it.” Alex spoke of how Batman and Robin (Figure 17) were supporting mobilization by endorsing the 7th war loan. He said, “It is unacceptable to promote
war but funding the war is appropriate; it depends what angle you take.” Students talked
excitedly, trying to figure out why their values were so different from the values of sixty-five
years ago. This sense of empathy, being able to view the other side’s view, is critical in
possessing historical understanding. As shown with Sequential Art samples that relate to the
dropping of the atomic bomb and the Holocaust, students displayed historic empathy. Primary
sources that showcase visuals tended to peak their interest.

Figure 16. Startling Comics #41 © DC Comics.
Observation 9. In the ninth observation, Ms. Smith approached the topics of Okinawa and “island hopping” through the comic book packet entitled “Chicken” (1951). Ms. Smith conducted a guided reading with students and asked them to answer three related questions. She asked, “Could someone please tell me about ‘island hopping’?” Ross said, “To take over specific islands.” Cathy mentioned that for the Japanese, “Surrender dishonored yourself and your family.” Nick then asked about suicide planes and Joe referenced Kamikazes. Joe explained, “I heard that they only filled their planes [with gas] for part of the way so they did not back out.” Winston responded, “Midway is a refueling station.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What type of islands?” Ross said, “The ones near Australia.” Ray added, “...Fueling stations...” and Alex said, “...the ones with airbases.” Max summed up his understanding, saying, “The closer we got to Japan, the higher the cost because they had more defenses.” As a group, these students were connecting the evidence to their historic assertions based on Substantive Concepts. Without
using dates, geography, or names (Substantive Concepts), students would have been unable to connect to the five other components of historical understanding.

Ms. Smith asked students to locate Okinawa. Joe responded, “It is 350 miles from Japan.” She then asked, “Is war predictable and full of glory? Explain.” In response, Max wrote, “… it is unpredictable and even though you may get glory if you succeed…” while Nick wrote, “You can predict when a war is gonna happen, But you can’t predict how it will end and how it will happen. War is not full of glory, for the amount of death to the stories of heroes it is not full of glory.” She then asked, “Why are these soldiers, as portrayed in this story, expendable?” In response, Jim said, “No, the soldiers portrayed in the story are not expendable because every soldier’s life is valued and cannot just be replaced.” In contrast to Jim, Cathy said, “In this story, the whole company B was wiped out. But the captain didn’t care; he just said, ‘Get more,’ almost as if they were property.”

Students, by using Substantive Concepts, were able to employ historical empathy for not only the victims of the atomic bomb but for others as well. In observation nine, Ray concluded that, “The Japanese were going to die fighting.” Alex added, “They were never going to give up.” Ms. Smith then challenged her students by asking, “Was dropping the atomic bomb – dropped on August 6th and 9th – right, then?” Joe recognized the dilemma, saying, “Civilians suffered from the bomb.” By being able to utilize Substantive Concepts, students were able to contextualize primary sources and compose logical argumentation.

Observation 10. In observation ten, students read a packet entitled Saipan, answered four questions, and then discussed their answers. In World War II, Saipan was an island the United States needed to occupy in order to assault Japan. Ms. Smith asked, “How is Saipan critical to the American strategy of island hopping?” Engaging the question, Jane said, “They wanted to
break the line of defense. They wanted to cut off communication between the Japanese homeland and the Japanese soldiers.” The instructor then asked, “Does this packet show jungle warfare to be traditional?” Haley said, “No, because this comic shows the Japanese sticking out like sore thumbs when usually they aren’t.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What motivated those soldiers to persevere?” Nathan said, “They maybe thought that the Japanese murdered us and they were getting revenge saving as many Americans that they could,” while Winston offered, “They had to fight for their comrades to succeed to save American lives.” Again, students showed a capacity to employ Substantive Concepts in order to connect to the other components of historical understanding.

After reading a Sequential Art sample on Saipan (Davis, 1952), Ms. Smith agreed with them, saying, “It is easier to them as savage animals. Why was Saipan important?” Winston answered, “By attacking Saipan, they were getting closer to Japan and breaking down their communication.” Robert asked about Jungle warfare. Ms. Smith defined Jungle warfare as combat in the jungle where the enemy is largely unseen. Robert then said, “It is when the enemy hide in the jungle and use it as protection to attack the enemy.” Ms. Smith then asked, “Does this packet show jungle warfare?” Joe answered, “No, because we could see the enemy out in the open.” Jane observed that the Americans, “…went to save others so they put themselves at risk.” By contextualizing the vignette on Saipan, students were able to speculate about causes and consequences.

The use of Substantive Concepts led to the employment of Meta-Concepts. Ms. Smith asked, “Where is Saipan located?” Peter answered, “South of Iwo Jima.” She then asked, “How is Saipan critical to the American strategy of island hopping?” Joe answered, “Break the line of defense. They were hoping to cut off communication from Japanese soldiers to the Japanese
homeland.” In referencing the Saipan piece of Sequential Art (Davis, 1952), she asked, “Does this packet show jungle warfare to be traditional?” Robert responded, “No, because the Japanese are sticking out and no one is really hiding and there aren’t any really sneak attacks and we suffered no heavy losses,” while Hugh said, “Yes, they are in the jungle trying to kill banzais and they are in the fields.” Ethel followed with, “Yes because the Japanese were on their homeland and it was for use. But in this the Japanese were not hiding.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What motivated these soldiers to persevere?” In response, Winston said, “They wanted to fight for their comrades to succeed. To save American lives,” while Nathan said, “They maybe thought that the Japanese murdered us and they were getting revenge saving as many Americans as they could.” There was an evident connection between the use of Substantive Concepts and the employment of Meta-Concepts.

By corroborating and interpreting sources, students were able to contextualize the past. In observation ten (Davis, 1952), the teacher asked, “What is a Banzai attack?” Ray said, “When they [come] straight at you and sacrifice themselves.” Referring to the characters within the packet, Ray said, “Leinoff is the only one holding off the enemy and he is looking to protect his friend Bartolli.” Ms. Smith then asked, “How does it end?” Ray answered, “It ends well because no one [American] dies.” Students failed to recognize that the lone Japanese soldier died. The teacher then asked, “You only saw the image of the one Japanese soldier. How are they portraying him?” Sam answered, “…as a savage.” Ms. Smith commented, “I thought it was a rabid animal.” Joe said the artists made the Japanese soldier “look non-human.” Hugh added, “Cause they don’t want the Americans to think of them as human and worry about the guilt.” By recognizing the nature of propaganda as biased, students displayed a capacity to contextualize the source.
Observation 11. In observation eleven (Wood, 1953), the teacher conducted a guided reading and the students answered three questions, which were followed by discussion. After examining a packet of Sequential Art discussing the atomic bomb (1953), Ms. Smith asked the class, “What did those who survived the bomb have to worry about?” Joe answered, “Radiation poisoning.” She then asked, “What happened to Toshio Tabawa?” Nathan explained that the shock of learning that most of his family died at Nagasaki “shocked” the character to death. By linking the concept of island hopping to the dropping of the atomic bomb, Ms. Smith helped students contextualize, or frame, the event.

Then, Ms. Smith asked, “Did island hopping lead to the atomic bomb?” Robert said, “No, the Atomic bomb was because Japan would not give up.” Andrea responded, “No, they only took certain islands to capture, and they starved out the other islands. They would have dropped the bomb regardless if the Japanese didn’t surrender,” while Hugh said, “Yes, because the closer Americans got to Japan, the more casualties there were, creating a bigger need to end the war.” Students recognized the connection between island hopping and the eventual dropping of the atomic bomb in the overall context of World War II.

Ms. Smith then asked, “How is dropping the A-bomb on Nagasaki an example of Total War?” In response, Jill said, “Innocent lives were lost. [It] didn’t affect just the soldiers, [it] impacted civilians,” while Max observed, “Because it involved everything; not just military men, it involved women, children, grandparents, and even pets.” Cathy added, “It is an example of total war because not only are the soldiers affected, but innocent women and children.” Ms. Smith then followed with, “Do you think it was the right decision? Why or why not?” Nick answered, “Yes, because it saved many American soldiers from dying and having to go to war,” while Jim followed with, “Yes, if the bomb didn’t drop we would have lost many American lives
along with many Japanese lives. If it wasn’t dropped the war would have continued. Students, in offering their assertions connecting to the evidence as a group, cobble together an argument. The implication here is that the group examination of artifacts, coupled with group discussion, led to the group composing an argument.

Students posed and engaged informed historical questions by employing measures of Substantive Concepts. Hugh observed, referring to island hopping, “It allowed them to get closer to Japan… and it helped them make the decision to drop the bomb.” Joe added, “They saw it in terms of men dying.” Nick said, “It was the physical location they could take off from to get to Japan.” Ethel then concluded, “Island hopping was a big part of it.” Ms. Smith reminded the class that Nagasaki was the second dropping of the atomic bomb. Students’ comments showed their capacity to engage questions, offering interpretations that showed historical understanding and thinking. In eleven observations, the researcher observed students exploring World War II through Sequential Art samples. In those lessons students displayed the six components of historical understanding.

**Highlights of the Classroom Observations**

In the first observation, students contextualized the ideologies of fascism and communism through a two-page Superman excerpt. In the second observation, they analyzed various comic book covers in trying to categorize propaganda, mobilization, and ideologies. In the third observation, students posed and engaged historical questions drawn from six Dr. Seuss propaganda cartoons. In the fourth observation, students read and engaged historical questions drawn from a comic book packet pertaining to the amphibious landing that happened on D-Day. During the fifth observation, students read a comic book packet portraying para-troopers landing in Normandy during D-Day, engaging questions and forming an argument. The sixth observation
called for students to answer questions after reading a comic book packet that showed the demolition men known as “frog men” preparing for the D-Day invasion.

In the seventh observation, students displayed Meta-Concepts after reading two excerpts from *Maus*. In the eighth observation, students were required to reconcile the values of today with values within the comic book covers that portrayed themes of racism and propaganda; this exercise revealed their skills of self-efficacy and historical empathy. Substantive Concepts were emphasized in the eighth observation, where students read a comic book packet that discussed “island hopping” and the importance of Okinawa. In the tenth observation, students considered the reality of “Jungle Warfare” by reading a comic packet and participate in discussion, displaying Substantive Concepts. In the eleventh observation, students showed a capacity to contextualize the past by reading and examining a comic book packet on the A-bomb. Out of all the Sequential Art samples, this story made students stop and question the dropping of the A-bomb by placing them, through a combination of words and images, into the moment.

**Post-unit Student Focus Groups**

After the eleven observations were completed, post-unit focus groups were conducted to consider the participants’ perspective on history as reflected through Sequential Art. Throughout these observations students displayed the six components of historical understanding as well as a capacity to display sound self-efficacy, historical empathy, and engage multi-modal learning.

Table 4

*Themes in relationship to the data gained through the second session of student focus groups.*

- Students see Sequential Art as a medium that can support meaningful lessons in history.
Students display the skill of historical empathy tied to argumentation in approaching the aftermath of the atomic bomb through Sequential Art.

The combination of words and images appeals to the preferred learning styles of most students.

Students think that comic books can serve as a vehicle for learning history.

Students see Sequential Art as a medium that can support meaningful lessons in history. In post-unit focus groups, student responses were strong. When asked, “Within your history class, over the past four weeks, what topic is most memorable to you?” Max emphasized how much he liked this project. He explained, “The Point Du Hoe, when they showed them trying to get up the hill; it showed them landing, shooting the grappling hooks, and struggling up the hill– there was lots of details like how the ropes tied to the grappling hooks were wet and messed everything up and they pushed through and succeeded.” All the students communicated that Sequential Art made history easier to understand. Joe followed Max with, “I would say the Germans and the concentration camps” (Spiegelman, 1997). Ethel’s choice was, “The Germans and the concentration camps because what happened to them was so awful. When they went to concentration camps, how random the killing was, and how it was discriminatory toward the Jews.” As student comments show, an example of where Sequential Art can impart meaningful lessons in history is in relation to the Holocaust.

Students display the skill of historical empathy tied to argumentation in approaching the aftermath of the atomic bomb through Sequential Art. In the post-unit focus groups, students touched upon the issue of the historical argument several times. In one focus group, Cathy said, “I have to agree with [Jill] about the argument thing. An example could
be …[the] bombing of the Japanese family. With World War II, we are taught, oh yeah,
Americans are great and we learn this stuff, but then with the Japanese and the bombing and
everything; with the comic we saw it from their perspective.” Jill showed empathy when she said, “The most memorable thing would probably be the comic strip, umm, when we saw the Japanese family had the bomb dropped on them. We usually learn about the war from America’s perspective and now we saw it from [the Japanese] family’s perspective” (Wood, 1953). This evidence shows that students are able to recognize conflicting perspectives from Sequential Art. Recognition of the awful aftermath of the atomic bomb shows that students display the skill of historical empathy tied to argumentation.

The combination of words and images appeals to most learning preferences of students. Ethel answered that without Sequential Art, “It is just like, boring. I really don’t pay attention because you’re not learning anything. I do not want … just words; I want …pictures from the time period so I can [see] what it was like and not just told to me. [Sequential Art] makes it easy to learn.” Joe followed with, “For me, it makes it easier if I have a visual because the pictures are showing me and the words are telling. Combining words and images help me learn. When Ms. Smith was talking about the Pacific like Guadalcanal or the beaches in Normandy and stuff like that. If she was just talking about it, I can’t… it would be hard to picture what it looked like because I wasn’t there because I wasn’t born there. If she has a picture to show me then I can understand more.” Joe explained that, “Adding [pictures and words] together can kinda help because, for propaganda, you can [see] what people’s attitude [is] towards the war was through the pictures. It’s cool.” In response, Al said, “Yeah. [Visual images] help me understand what they are talking about. To me, photographs and art are the same.” Ethel said, “Yeah, [the art] shows a difference from a photograph.”
Other students offered similar answers. Winston explained that, “Without art it is hard because art gives you a visual of what is happening. If it is described [with words], you still may not have as good an idea of what is happening as with a picture.” Jill insisted, “If it is just lectures and notes then it is boring. Even PowerPoints have visuals but not a ton. In comic books there are mostly visuals – the more visuals the better off you are.” Cathy explained that, “If you don’t use visuals you are describing what happened and you don’t get a chance to [see] how devastating it was as in the Holocaust.” Max said, “Without visuals, you zone out and most people don’t get the information; the two languages [words and visuals] help. Hugh explained that, “If you just describe, [the students] don’t really process it. I really like the comic books because they made you focus and understand it. Just having words makes it confusing; having visuals definitely helps.”

When asked, “Explain how images like cartoons, comic strips, or visuals –what I call Sequential Art – are, or are not, helpful in learning?” Al responded with, “They are helpful, like in the PowerPoints, if you are reading about something just having a picture [beside] the words help me understand it better.” Joe stated, “I think comic books, when we are reading the comic books, just the dialect people had and so pictures that go with it help show the attitude of the writer and the people who were in the war and what was happening.” Ethel said, “They are definitely helpful in some way, like when you have an actual picture of people that is sad, a cartoon is different. A cartoon shows you their emotions; cartoons show the emotions behind a picture. You don’t have to be serious all the time with cartoons. Cartoons make you laugh while pictures are depressing.” By students’ own admission, and as seen in this study, multi-modal sources increase students’ capacity to articulate details about the past.
Students think that comic books can serve as a vehicle for history. Most students recognize Sequential Art as a learning resource. Al said, “It is a fun way to learn because it puts you there and if it is boring and you’re not going to learn.” Along that line, Joe added, “I think—along the lines—it helps people stay focused with it because each of us has read one bubble each and you have to follow along and you have to know what is happening, you need to pay attention.” Providing an example, Joe explained, “… you can relate to Superman’s personality and then that ties into the war, all that, and how he saves lives.”

Seeking further understanding of their point of view, students were asked, “Which sample of Sequential Art did you find helpful and why?” Al said, “The one with ‘Duck-Butt’ because it made the most unlikely guy the biggest hero. It was fun to read” (Wood, 1951). Joe explained:

The most helpful were the big stories, the actual comic books, in my mind especially the D-Day one we read. Also the Atomic bomb one because it helps shows what was happening with all the different slides to the people grabbing their stuff. At the beginning, it showed a family that was living during the time and the son going off to war. Then it showed the family getting bombed and all that.

Ethel offered her view, saying:

Well, I did not really like the comic books as much as the covers [political cartoons]. I did not really pay attention with the comic books as much as the Dr. Seuss cartoons. The Dr. Seuss cartoon with the animals on the wall that showed Italy as cat hung on the wall with the bear being ready to attack Hitler.” [Student is referring to the cartoon where Hitler is portrayed as a taxidermist and the conquered nations of Europe are his trophies but he is unable to kill the U.S.S.R.] That is the one I remember the most.
Joe added that,

I really like the comic book idea because it helps me understand the attitude of the people of the time. What, you know, we look at a picture and have our opinion but to have a drawing from the people from the time helps us what they see.

Al further explained, “With the comic books, I mean, it just helps so much. I understand things when I look at them and I understand better.” Jill, in reference to Sequential Art, said, “If someone tried to explain it just through words, I wouldn’t get it. The pictures almost scar you. The images allow you to know how bad it really was.” Hugh said, “Umm, the comic book of the Holocaust (Figures 9 & 10). I would rather read the comic book Maus than Elie Wiesel’s Night because it has pictures and is shorter. It lets you understand it with less work.”

In trying to explain how Sequential Art is helpful in learning, Max said, “I think it is very helpful because you get two aids. You get the visual aids and you get the word stuff. Having images and words from the people are there; it all sticks in your mind. That is helpful.” He continued, “I would say it’s kind of like a video game because everyone is reading it and it’s like everyone is playing it so everyone is into it. It’s almost like you’re a part of history. These comic books made me think of Call of Duty [a video game] and it made me get more into it.”

Cathy explained, “I think pictures definitely do help because it stays with you and sticks in your mind. If you [are] taking notes, you might not remember and you have to go over it. If you have a visual to help you out, it sticks with you.” Jill offered, “I think the comic books help, not only because they’re visual, but it’s not like having a history book tell you what happened, you see people having conversations, you can see what they are saying or what they could have said. It puts you in the moment.”
Sequential Art proved to be a potent learning tool in several ways. First, it forced students to compare the values of the past with those of today. Second, it allowed them to have the confidence to be an informed member of a dialogue discussing history. Finally, Sequential Art supports reluctant learners by combining words and images.

**Post-unit Teacher Interview Themes**

After the initial teacher interview, focus groups, and observations, the second teacher interview was conducted. The post-unit teacher interview revealed three conclusions, outlined in Table 5 below.

**Table 5**

*Themes in relationship to the data gained through the post-unit teacher interview.*

- Sequential Art challenges students’ entrenched positions.
- Sequential Art captures racism of the past.
- Sequential Art fosters historical understanding because it appeals to students.

**Sequential Art challenges students’ entrenched positions.** Ms. Smith was asked, “How did Sequential Art prompt discussions, or argumentation, among students?” The teacher explained that Sequential Art made students challenge their own entrenched positions. She explained, “They were looking at [the atomic bomb] from the point that we were right and if we had ten more, we should have used them (Wood, 1953). Then we read the one [comic packet] that came from the Japanese perspective then they saw the innocent children as well as the innocent women and men and the impact on their lives. That brought about the question: ‘Should we have dropped one? Should we have dropped two or five, six, or seven?’ Before reading the packet they all would have said, ‘Yes.’ But after reading that packet on the Atomic bomb most of
them would have said, ‘No.’ That packet of Sequential Art changed their mind[s]. They did not have the compassion element going into that reading, they had it afterwards.” In Ms. Smith’s view Sequential Art fits in nicely with the curriculum but it is necessary to always alternate day-to-day. Her students, she explained, prefer that she alternate their learning strategies.

The next question posed to Ms. Smith was, “How did Sequential Art prompt historical questions among students?” In claiming that her students’ questions and observations were impressive after examining the Sequential Art, she said, “The one on the Holocaust that associated the different characters to the different forms of governments, pulling those [items] out and figuring those [differences] out. In their questions and answers, they were talking about the differences in the rats and the cats.” Within the story of *Maus*, students fully grasped the metaphor that portrayed the Jews as mice and the Germans as cats. By allowing them to recognize the difference between a nationality (the cats) and a religion (the mice) through their examination of *Maus*, Ms. Smith was able to regulate a dialogue among the students that was informed and specific.

**Sequential Art captures racism of the past.** Within the work relating to the Holocaust, *Maus*, Ms. Smith explained that, “They were saying that the cats ate the rats.” In those packets relating to the Pacific, she explained that students were picking up on the concept of “island hopping” before she even mentioned it. Establishing students’ understanding of island hopping through the Sequential Art vignette allowed her to shepherd the class to a higher level of discussion. The next question was, “How does Sequential Art contextualize history for students?” Ms. Smith found that students interpreted the artifacts and entertained the interpretations of others. In her view, Sequential Art led to great discussion. As an example she pointed to: “I think it [Sequential Art] underlined some of the racist undertones that were brought
out through some of the words that described the ethnic backgrounds.” She continued, “When the word ‘Japs’ was used and so I had to explain a little forcefully that it was a word that was used back then and is not to be used today. Laughing about it is not acceptable today. Some of them had offered a nervous laugh, a kid laugh.” In dealing with some of the Sequential Art material, some of the students recognized it as racist. Ms. Smith explained this when she said, “So I think that there were parts of [the images from Sequential Art] that are not accepted today.” Sequential Art, with its racist overtones, made them consider what propaganda is.

**Sequential Art fosters historical understanding because it appeals to students.** Ms. Smith explained that she saw great value in Sequential Art. When asked if she would use this as part of the curriculum next year, she said, “Yes, definitely. [In approaching lesson planning], you have to look at the dynamic of leveling…” Despite having to go at a slower pace in a lower level class, Ms. Smith explained that, “[Sequential Art] …can be used from ECP to honors. Sequential Art can be used in large classes and small classes. The key is getting all kids actively involved.”

Continuing, she explained:

None of the kids wanted to be the one to lose their place. No one wanted to be that kid, so it forced them to be on-task. This class can get very distracted and can be off-track; [during this unit] these kids did not do that. They were fantastic. They really liked it and these are the type of kids that would tell you if they did not like it. They have no problem telling you if they do not like something.

The higher-level thinking students displayed as a result of the Sequential Art impressed her. When she asked students why they liked it, 90% percent of them said, “Because it gave them something to see; they like to [read] it.” She suggests that Sequential Art can be utilized across all levels and that it is a source that appeals to the students. Whether in looking at an issue in the
Pacific Theatre, western Europe, or on the eastern front, Sequential Art proved to be an effective tool in the history classroom by appealing to the playful nature of the adolescent. Ms. Smith’s views are consistent with the focus groups and the observations.

**Summary of Findings**

In summary, the teacher pre- and post-unit interviews, student pre- and post-unit focus groups, and the eleven observations produced data that shows the value of Sequential Art in the teaching and learning of history. Sequential Art supported students’ historical understanding through a multi-modal approach. Its use in Ms. Smith’s unit on World War II helped establish a common line of reasoning (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007) that ultimately leads to developing the six components of historical understanding in high school students taking American History. Sequential Art, the cooperating teacher argued, helped tell the story of history while emphasizing historical content, skills, and concepts; it promoted higher-order thinking and made students adjust their entrenched positions. Throughout the study, students showed an affinity for Sequential Art and many claimed that it was helpful in learning history. Beyond evidencing the student employment of the six components of historical understanding, this study revealed the historical empathy of students connected to argumentation and contextualization. This was specifically seen when issues of racism surfaced within the artifacts that were originally examples of propaganda. This study further reveals that the combination of words and images that define Sequential Art are potent enough to challenge students’ entrenched positions.

**Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings**

This chapter will review the problem of practice and provide a discussion of the research findings as they relate directly to the research question of this study. The major findings will also be discussed in relationship to the study’s theoretical framework as well as the literature
review provided in Chapter 2. Lastly, the final analysis and recommendations, significance of
the study, limitations, and conclusion with recommendations will be presented.

**Revisiting the Problem of Practice**

For students, establishing authentic historical understanding is a challenge. In their
world, where adults subtly emphasize the monetary rewards of mastering science and
mathematics over the humanities, the school system rarely designates history as a true priority.
In fact, history often loses when compared to the demands of the students’ lives. In a climate
where students operate in a world of instant communication and immediate gratification, it is
difficult for them to frame their thinking with a historian’s eye.

Students settle for memorizing facts rather than establishing the intellectual qualities of a
historian because it is both the path of least resistance and the prevailing pedagogical approach
of the education system. Evidence of this commitment to memorization over true historical
thought is seen in the system’s dependence on the history textbook rather than the routine use of
primary sources that would promote interpretation by individual students. (Wineburg, 2001;
Paxton, 1999; Bain, 2006; Mayer 2006). That commitment compounds the lack of historical
thinking when classroom routines foster short-term recall rather than expanded understanding of
salient topics and themes (Liu, Shen, Warren, & Cowart, 2006). The political mandate for
students to survey periods of history at the expense of learning historical concepts and skills
curtails authentic historical understanding for the sake of coverage. While the intention of the
state is not to foster coverage, its failure to require a state-wide history exam does not allow for
accountability. As a result of history not being a state-wide tested subject in Massachusetts (de
Oliveira, 2008), it is unclear to students how history should be approached.
In response to this systemic reality, this study investigated the use of Sequential Art in a history classroom as a potential resource and strategy to raise the teaching and learning of history from a matter of memorizing facts to an opportunity for historical inquiry in keeping with historical understanding. To frame the purpose, design, and analysis of the study, the following research question was identified:

How does the use of Sequential Art support students in employing the six components of historical thinking and understanding, as observed in the classroom, reported by the classroom teacher, and as determined through student focus groups and work products?

The significance of the findings as they connect to the six components of historical understanding will be addressed below. In addition, three themes emerged from a review of the findings: self-efficacy, historical empathy, and multi-modal learning, all of which will be discussed below.

**Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I present a discussion of how the use of Sequential Art supported students in employing the six components of historical thinking and understanding as observed in the classroom, reported by the classroom teacher, and as determined through student focus groups and work products. The three emerging themes of how use of Sequential Art supported historical empathy, self-efficacy, and multi-modal learning will also be presented.
The findings in relationship to the six components of historical understanding. The six components of historical understanding are: historical questions, Substantive Concepts, Meta-Concepts, use of sources, argumentation, and contextualization (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). The use of Sequential Art supported students’ historical understanding because it established a common line of reasoning through questions raised between the teacher and the students (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 90).

Students displayed the six components of historical understanding as evidenced by multiple researcher observations, and as commented on by both the teacher and the students themselves in post-unit focus groups. Through the use of Sequential Art as a primary resource, students developed sound historical understanding, which could be seen in the depth and range of their contributions. While engaging the historical materials and the curriculum as a whole, students treated history as a story while displaying strong historical understanding.

Figure 18. Superman. © DC Comics
In my experience, the historical question is where the experience with the past often begins and eventually ends. It is a person’s capacity to inform and challenge the perception of others. Substantive Concepts, because they position students to engage the other five components, are essential. An example of Substantive Concepts is a capacity to know dates and terms. Next, Meta-Concepts are the ability of an individual to employ historical methods. An example of Meta-Concepts is the capacity to distinguish contrasting values of different eras.

The ability of an individual to use sources is critical for historical understanding because it allows them to measure and judge a source for themselves rather than to rely on others. One’s capacity to interpret fosters an ability to form original arguments. An ability to form an argument is essential not only to the historian but as the basis for our society. Finally, a student’s ability to employ contextualization allows them to see the evolution of civilization in small and large segments. It allows them to frame the abstract idea with understanding rather than in a cloud of confusion. Students convinced me, in this study, that Sequential Art can foster the six components of historical understanding.

**Historical questions.** This component of historical understanding refers to the manner in which students compose and engage informed historical questions (van Drie & van Boxtel). The higher-level thinking of students, after examining the Sequential Art, impressed Ms. Smith. When asked in the pre-unit interview if students commonly compose historical questions, Ms. Smith said, “Yes, they do, especially when it is the material they like.” Student enthusiasm for Sequential Art is seen throughout the data. After looking at an excerpt (Figure 18), Ethel asked Jill, “…you know about that [League of Nations?”], which led Ross to explain, “They did not get involved in the League of Nations because of World War I.” Al asked, “Was Russia a part of the League of Nations?” Commenting on the comic strip, Ethel observed, “Oh, [was it] because the
American (sic) was not a part of the League of Nations?” This interaction between students revealed their efforts to sort out the different components of America’s role in the League of Nations, Joseph Stalin, and Adolph Hitler. While students did not frequently pose complete historical questions, this piece of Sequential Art triggered meaningful questions on the part of these students. By confronting the question of why the United States failed to join the League of nations, students foreshadowed the cause of World War II. The American policy of isolation, as reflected in this Sequential Art sample, enabled the fascist states to expand their influence. In the seventh observation, students considered a Sequential Art sample (Figure 19). This led Peter to ask, “What does segregate mean?” The teacher explained that to segregate was to separate people and this was a step in the eventual mass killing of the Jews. Peter responded with, “So,
they wanted them to suffer?” And Ray asked, “So they cannot have kids because of segregation?” Ray then recognized the implied metaphor in the cartoon, saying, “Ah! Cats eat mice!” The second excerpt from another Sequential Art sample (Spiegelman, 1997, pp. 84-85) caused Jill to ask, “What is genocide?” Andrea observed that the pictures showed, “[A] kilo of sugar for a

Figure 20. *Maus*. Copyright by Art Spiegelman. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House.

person!?” She was referencing a sign that offered one kilo of sugar for any unregistered Jew turned in (Figure 20). This led Andrea to conclude, “In the eyes of the Nazis, they were
worthless.” Ethel then held up both excerpts and asked, “What do the coupons do?” She recognized that coupons allowed them to purchase and sell goods; however, doing this without coupons was “Going against Nazi authority by selling on the black market.” This data, drawn from the two observations, attests to the capacity of students to examine primary sources and pose informed historical questions. By understanding the purpose of the ration coupons in a war economy, students are able to understand a command economy and contrast it to a consumer economy.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith – in addressing the topic of historical questions – explained:

Well, I saw a lot of the questions going back and forth with the Holocaust piece we did as well as the piece of the atomic bomb. They were looking at [the atomic bomb] from the point that we were right and if we had ten more, we should have used them. Then we read the one [comic packet] that came from the Japanese perspective then they saw the innocent children as well as the innocent women and men and the impact on their lives. That then brought about the question: ‘Should we have dropped one? Should we have dropped two or five, six, or seven?’ Before reading the packet they all would have said, ‘Yes.’ But after reading that packet on the Atomic bomb most of them would have said, ‘No.’ That packet of Sequential Art changed their mind. They did not have the compassion element going into that reading. They had it afterwards.

A “comic book packet” refers to a vignette of 6-8 pages excerpted from a larger comic book. This story illustrates the struggles of one Japanese family to meet their daily needs on the home front in a war-time economy before falling victim to the A-bomb. In one of the focus groups, Alex explained, “My vote goes for the atomic bomb because we read the comic strip that showed
Nagasaki. It was very vivid and shows how a lot of people died and stuff.” This sampling, combined with Ms. Smith’s observations, points to how Sequential Art can help students to challenge their established perception of history. With this piece of Sequential Art, the students’ historical empathy for figures of the past is evident.

**Substantive Concepts.** This is the capacity of students to synthesize basic history and discuss elementary ideas (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). In terms of Substantive Concepts, the teacher explained in the pre-unit interview, “What I do is try and keep the amount of those [facts] down. I try not to overwhelm them.” She continued, “I think it is picking and choosing what is important and then emphasizing them constantly through the lesson.”

In observation nine, students examined a piece of Sequential Art, a 7-8-page vignette, that portrayed Okinawa (Davis, 1952). In this packet, United States Marines were forced to engage the unpredictable nature of jungle warfare. Ms. Smith asked students to locate Okinawa. Joe responded, “It is 350 miles from Japan.” Recognizing that the possession of Okinawa put American bombers within striking distance of Japan, Mrs. Smith asked, “Is war predictable and full of glory? Explain.” In response, Max wrote, “… it is unpredictable and even though you may get glory if you succeed.” Along these same lines, Nick wrote, “You can predict when a war is gonna happen, but you can’t predict how it will end and how it will happen. War is not full of glory, for the amount of death to the stories of heroes it is not full of glory.” In concluding that war is terrible and that conflict can be anticipated, students were contextualizing the historic factors and the jingoism displayed in certain pieces of Sequential Art. In observation ten, students engaged a seven-page packet of Sequential Art taken from a collection of stories within a single comic book that was about Saipan (Appendix G). Ms. Smith asked, “How is Saipan critical to the American strategy of island hopping?” Jane said, “They wanted to break the line of
defense. They wanted to cut off communication between the Japanese homeland and the Japanese soldiers.” The instructor then asked, “Does this packet show jungle warfare to be traditional?” Haley answered, “No, because this comic shows the Japanese sticking out like sore thumbs when usually they aren’t.” Students were able to use the building blocks of history, known as Substantive Concepts, and link their analysis to each of the five other historical components.

The linkage between historical components is clear. By engaging Ms. Smith’s question about jungle warfare and island hopping, students showed sound understanding of one component (historical questions). By understanding the dates and terms in the packet (Substantive Concepts) students corroborated this source with their understanding (use of sources), which allowed them to understand the larger picture (contextualization). Recognizing that the closer the United States Military got to Japan, students realized that Japanese resolve only increased in an effort to protect their home (Meta-Concepts). This realization, coupled with the eventual dropping of the A-bomb, made students define their own moral position in regard to the war with Japan (argumentation). In the post-unit focus groups, Haley saw the Sequential Art as helpful. In discussing the medium of Sequential Art, she explained that, “Along with paying attention, there are certain things you have to commit to memory. You need to understand what you [are] looking at, you have to have sympathy.” The visuals of the comic books helped her understand.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith was impressed with how well Sequential Art supported Substantive Concepts. As she explained,

Prior to giving any of the material out, I had to do a fair amount of research before we read it as a class. And there were certainly things that I was unfamiliar with; SNAFU I
knew, but different levels of infantry I did not know and I had to look that up. Prior to the reading I went over the different words I didn’t think they would understand. If I did it while we were reading it then it would have interrupted the reading and we looked at those difficult words ahead of time. This allowed us to have a smooth, uninterrupted reading and it went well. This helped establish their understanding of words. Some kids might have that military background, but most do not.

**Meta-concepts.** This component of historical understanding refers to the ability of students to understand the cause of events and movements, grasp chronology, and assert cause (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). In the pre-unit interview, Ms. Smith explained her instructional approach to Meta-Concepts: “I organize history like a story. I don’t teach it like, this happened and then this. I teach it like a story.” She qualified her approach, saying, “So I try to formulate it more like a story so they understand and not just facts so they understand.”

In the second observation, the teacher divided the class into five different groups; each group was given seven comic book covers published during World War II. Their assignment was to categorize these covers under the labels of sabotage, mobilization, and political ideology. They were then asked to offer a rationale.
Group 1 placed Cat Man #19 (Figure 21) under political ideology because it is “promoting war bonds” and Thrilling Comics #50 (Figure 22) under mobilization because “…it shows [a] soldier armed and ready for war…”
Group 2 placed Cat Man #19 for the promotion of war bonds, Cat Man #27 (Figure 23) for a hero leading the Marines, air force, and navy into action, and Superman #12 (Figure 24) for marching arm-in-arm with the American military and being nationalistic.

Figure 23. Cat Man #27 © Dynamite Entertainment.

Figure 24. Superman #12 © DC Comics.
All of these fell under the category of mobilization. Group 3 addressed only three of the assigned comic book covers because they engaged in a much more protracted discussion of their rationale for categorizing the different cartoons.

*Figure 25. Batman #30 © DC Comics.*

In placing Batman #30 (Figure 25) under sabotage, they explained, “He blew up dynamite by the Japanese, Hitler, and Mussolini. Batman has a pleased look on his face and he is walking away.”
Group 4 placed Wonder Comics #4 (Figure 26) and Wonder Comics #5 (Figure 27) under sabotage. Wonder Comics #4 depicted an American hero preventing a Japanese spy from sending codes; Wonder Comics #5 depicted Americans fighting off the Japanese to save Americans from civilian camps.

*Figure 26.* Wonder Comics #4 © DC Comics.

*Figure 27.* Wonder Comics #5 © DC Comics.
Here again students demonstrated their ability to assert historical meaning from the various illustrations. Group 5 put Cat Man #19 under sabotage, “…because they are punching the leaders of the alliances.” Given similar responses by every group, the evidence in this case shows that students were able to categorize the artifacts supported by a very specific rationale related to historical thinking.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith also stated that she believed Sequential Art supported the development of the skills of the historian in her students. As she explained:

We saw a lot of that with the [comic book covers], which made them ask, “Is this propaganda or mobilization?” versus some form of strategy within the Sequential Art and then having another group disagreeing with the other group of students. Each group, I found, offered different views, but both views were accurate. They convinced each other of the other side’s view. They were able to recognize the others’ logic.

Ms. Smith’s feedback is corroborated by Nick. In recalling what was meaningful to him, Nick said, “World War II. Island hopping was memorable because when we were going over it, using the comic strips, gave me examples through the stories which allowed us to learn about it.”

Nick’s comment, which claims historical understanding, is representative of what other participants claimed. Whether the topic is island hopping, mobilization, or propaganda, Sequential Art helps students to contextualize the abstract idea.

**Use of sources.** This refers to the capacity of students to offer analysis, interpretation, and the reliability of sources (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). In considering the use of sources in the pre-unit interview, Ms. Smith explained, “We have done a lot with political cartoons; we have done a lot with just photographs in general.” She went on to explain that all of her PowerPoints contained “images as well as words.” After reading a Sequential Art sample on
Saipan (Davis, 1952), Ms. Smith agreed with her students, saying, “It is easier to see them as savage animals. Why was Saipan important?” Winston answered, “By attacking Saipan, they were getting closer to Japan and breaking down their communication.” Dan asked about jungle warfare. Ms. Smith defined jungle warfare as combat in the jungle where the enemy is largely unseen. Dan then said, “It is when the enemy hides in the jungle and uses it as protection to attack the enemy.” She then asked, “Does this packet show jungle warfare?” John answered, “No, because we could [see] the enemy out in the open.” Jane observed that the Americans “…went to save others so they put themselves at risk.” In examining a story on Saipan, students were able to speculate about the strategic value of that island in America’s overall strategy in the Pacific.

The written responses from observation seven were as informative as the discussion. After examining a Sequential Art excerpt from *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1997), the first written question students were confronted with was, “What is the concrete value, in the eyes of the Nazis, of an unregistered Jew?” The students’ tense body language and focused tone indicated that they were invested. Andrea said the Jews were worthless in the eyes of the Nazis, worth only one kilo of sugar. Jim added, “You get one kilo of sugar for every unregistered Jew you find.” Ethel responded, “They’re worthless, they cost next to nothing.” The interpretation of these sources demonstrated students’ capacity to display empathy and forward a historical argument based on the evidence. Their distress as displayed in their body language and in their tone, combined with their comments, provides an example of how Sequential Art elicited historical empathy.

Finally, Nick, who was representative of much of the student feedback drawn from the focus groups, claimed that,
Comic strips show both sides. It shows a point of view of who is fighting in the war. With the comic strip the teacher isn’t just teaching you. You are, like teaching yourself, interacting with it because you are reading it out loud. That’s what causes it to stick with me.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith – once again referencing the use of sources – concluded: “I was really surprised, in a really good way, that those longer comic books were some of their favorites. The way the comic books were written, specifically for a 15 or 16 year old, kept their interest throughout the whole reading.”

**Argumentation.** This component is the capacity to form a logical rationale, connect views to the evidence, and engage fundamental historical questions (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). Because of pacing demands, Ms. Smith had budgeted a limited amount of time for argumentation. In addressing argumentation in the pre-unit interview, Ms. Smith said, “When the opportunity is there for argument-based discussion, yes, I do [encourage that discussion].” She continued, “The time frame makes it difficult. Class discussion is important but it cannot dominate [our schedule] because according to the framework, we are supposed to go from [1865] to 2001, if not the present day. It is very difficult.”

In observation eleven, students again examined a 7-8-page comic book vignette that illustrated the experience of those who fell victim to the A-bomb. packet, Ms. Smith asked, “Did island hopping lead to the atomic bomb?” Dan said, “No the atomic bomb was because Japan would not give up.” Andrea responded, “No, they only took certain islands to capture, and they starved out the other islands. They would have dropped the bomb regardless if the Japanese didn’t surrender.” Hugh added, “Yes, because the closer Americans got to Japan, the more
casualties there were, creating a bigger need to end the war.” Students then recognized the connection between island hopping and the eventual dropping of the atomic bomb.

In referencing a comic book packet entitled “Chicken” (1951), Ms. Smith asked, “Could someone please tell me about ‘island hopping’?” Ross said, “To take over specific islands.” Cathy mentioned that for the Japanese, “surrender dishonored yourself and your family.” Nick asked about suicide planes and John then referenced Kamikazes. John explained, “I heard that they only filled their planes [with gas] for part of the way so they did not back out.” Winston responded, “Midway is a refueling station.” Ms. Smith then asked, “What type of islands?” Ross said, “The ones near Australia.” Ray added, “…fueling stations…” and Alex said, “…the ones with airbases.” Max summed up his understanding by saying, “The closer we got to Japan, the higher the cost because they had more defenses.” As a group, these students were connecting the evidence to their historical assertions, showing historical thought.

By using a Sequential Art sample as a primary source, students interpreted meaning. For instance, Haley observed, “The mice symbolize Jews and the cats symbolize the Nazis. The cats are more powerful than the mice, and in real life cats kill mice.” Nathan then observed, “It’s all about power. Cats have all the power.” As one example of the meaningful questions students posed, Andrea asked, “[A] kilo of sugar for a person?!” Within this question, there is evident analysis. Within each observation, students asserted their own argument based on their interpretation of the evidence, which show their capacity to think independently.

Within their analysis, students showed historical empathy. Andrea, who was representative of the focus group feedback, said, “… the comic strip was vivid and, sort of, portrayed the different views of the U.S. and Japan. You could relate to it because it showed a family, and you belong to a family and you kind of put yourself and their situation.”
empathy for historical figures, students were at a loss when required to confront racism of the past.

In a focus group, Cathy demonstrated the ability to embrace argumentation when she explained,

I have to agree with her about the argument thing. An example could be how we see the bombing of the Japanese family. With World War II, we are taught, oh yeah, Americans are great and we learn this stuff, but then with the Japanese and the bombing and everything; with the comic we saw, you just see it from their perspective.

In her observation, Cathy offered a rational assertion, tied her view to the evidence, and displayed a capacity for corroboration with another student’s views.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith explained, “When the word ‘Japs’ was used … I had to explain a little forcefully that it was a word that was used back then and is not to be used today.” She continued, “You see it not as much with Japanese but with other cultures. It made us look at: ‘What is propaganda?’ in the light of what they showed them. What were the Americans trying to get across?” As suggested by Ms. Smith, students were initially uncertain of how to process examples of racism.

**Contextualization.** This is the ability of students to inter-relate the past with the present, distinguish historical periods, and offer compassion to those in the past (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007). Ms. Smith recognized that it is difficult for each student to grasp the big picture in history. In the pre-unit interview, Ms. Smith addressed contextualization by saying, “That is tough. You do it by picking out need-to-know facts and letting go of some of the other things.” Going further, using the gold and silver debate as an example, she explained, “If you bring in
something like that, with real-life examples, and have them play the game, be part of it – be a stock broker – then they get it.”

Ms. Smith, in referencing “the gold and silver debate,” is referring to the now-obscure controversy that dominated politics in the late 19th century. That controversy was defined by which standard the nation’s monetary system was centered on: gold or silver. In the simplest terms, those who favored the gold standard preferred inflation rather than deflation while those who favored the silver standard preferred deflation and wanted to avoid inflation. This controversy pitted the Populist party, the Democratic party, and the Republican party against each other for much of the 1890’s. In referencing the gold and silver debate, Ms. Smith was providing an example of a topic that can be time consuming and abstract for students to authentically understand. Ms. Smith explained that while some students did eventually understand it, most did not. Currently, she chooses to cover it briefly and not expend the time for every student to fully know it.

It is evident that Sequential Art is able to contextualize topics within history. After examining a packet of Sequential Art, a 7-8-page story excerpted from a larger comic book about the atomic bomb (Wood, 1953), Ms. Smith asked the class, “What did those who survived the bomb have to worry about?” Joe answered, “Radiation poisoning.” She then asked, “What happened to Toshio Tabawa?” Nathan explained that the shock of learning that most of his family died at Nagasaki “shocked” the character to death.

Jill’s observation, which also reflected a capacity for contextualization, was that “Superman is attack[ing] the Japanese man and Hitler so it would be political ideology.” In this comment, Jill demonstrated a capacity to inter-relate the geopolitical movements that Hitler, Superman, and the Japanese represented in World War II. While Adolph Hitler and Japan’s
Prime Minister Tojo represent fascism, Superman – created by two men who are descended from Jewish immigrants – represents the democracy of America. From that observation, the class was positioned to explain the meaning of the illustration in the context of the early 1940’s.

In the post-unit interview, Ms. Smith commented,

I don’t know if this totally answers it, but after reading the Sequential Art, [and] based off of the notes and our notes, but [also] based off of what they saw in the Sequential Art, you use the word empathy, and they identified with the character.

Extending her answer, she said, “For example, they loved the character ‘Duck Butt.’ They loved certain parts of it. So looking at the assessments and the answers they gave, you can see that Sequential Art impacted their answers positively.” Offering further insight, she said, “In asking them what they liked about the Sequential Art, 90% percent of them said, ‘Because it gave them something to see.’ They like to see it.” She concluded that, “They saw the picture of ‘Duck Butt,’ his buddies trying to save him, and him dying. Sequential Art works to contextualize or to create a story because they can see it.” One student’s focus group comment reflected Ms. Smith’s opinion and was representative of much of the focus group commentary. He explained, “The comic strip was very vivid and we went over it. The comic strip showed the different sides; like the father who was a [Japanese] soldier didn’t find out his family was dead until it was too late.”

**Significant themes.** A review of the data revealed three significant themes in relationship to what was gained through the use of Sequential Art in the teaching of history: historical empathy, self-efficacy, and multi-modal learning. Each theme will be presented below in relationship to the observations, pre- and post-unit interviews with Ms. Smith, and the focus groups with students.
**Historical empathy.** Students displayed historical understanding while offering empathy through their observations of Sequential Art. When asked what a primary source was, for example, Jill showed empathy when she answered, “The most memorable thing would probably be the comic strip, umm, when we saw the Japanese family had the bomb dropped on them.” Jill’s answer is representative of how students showed a strong ability to consider an alternative perspective. By empathizing with a people who waged war on her country and by considering the views of another era, Jill was not having blind faith in what she had been told. The quality of questioning is a necessary ingredient for historical understanding.

Robert displayed empathy when he said, “The character named Pyro-man dropping an atomic bomb at any time is unacceptable” (see Figure 28). Jill added, “It is unacceptable because it is showing how to use the A-bomb and making light of it.” These comments show historic empathy because their comments reflect righteous indignation rooted in compassion. Further, their comments reflect a tone that realizes the horrors an atomic war will bring.

*Figure 28. Startling Comics #41 © DC Comics.*
Alex spoke of how Batman and Robin were supporting mobilization by endorsing the 7th war loan (Figure 29). He said, “It [is] unacceptable to promote war but funding the war [was] appropriate; it depends what angle you take.”

Students were quite interested in trying to figure out why their values were so different from the values of sixty-five years ago. The capacity of students to identify with the experiences of those from the past is historical empathy. Jill said, “We usually learn about the war from America’s perspective and now we saw it from [the Japanese] family’s perspective.” The capacity to empathize with historical figures and events represented the strongest historical quality of these students. Their sense of empathy, being able to see the other side’s view, is critical in possessing historical understanding. The opportunity to interpret history visually and attach empathy to their observations was an activity they valued. Students were demonstrating
historical empathy by challenging the decisions of the past (e.g., the Holocaust, the dropping of
the A-bomb, or the way to deploy soldiers into battle).

**Self-efficacy.** When working with Sequential Art, students displayed a high level of self-efficacy. For the purposes of this study, self-efficacy is the confidence an individual has in their
capacity to complete a task or embrace a challenge. Throughout this study, students contributed
and displayed the components of historical understanding. Evidence of this can be seen in how
students answered the question, “What are your favorite topics in history?” They offered a
variety of topics. Ray answered,

I liked the stock market crash because I always wanted to understand why everyone lost
all that money, I always thought it was completely random but when the teacher
explained it so it made a lot more sense. I learned more about it through discussion and
visuals.

Robert added, “My favorites are either World War II or Vietnam. My Dad is interested in them
so I became interested in them. The bombing of Pearl Harbor in World War II interests me. The
invention of the helicopter in Vietnam interests me.” Each student offered a topic that was
followed with a unique rationale.

One 7-8-page vignette, or comic book packet, emphasized the strategic value of Point Du
Hoe in the D-Day landings. This packet enabled students to learn that it was essential to control
the high ground during the invasion in order to protect the main landing forces arriving by
insuring that the Germans could not deploy heavy artillery to that location. Only a few minutes
after reading the Sequential Art packet, Max said,

The Point Du Hoe, when they’re showing them trying to get up the hill; it showed them
landing, shooting the grappling hooks, and struggling up the hill – there was lots of
details like how the ropes tied to the grappling hooks were wet and messed everything up and they pushed through and succeeded.

It could be argued that this level of comprehension would have been unlikely if the student had only been provided with a text-based narrative of the Rangers’ challenge at Point Du Hoe during D-Day. All the students communicated that Sequential Art made history easier to understand. The pattern of student responses like this, after examining Sequential Art samples, suggests that the use of Sequential Art supported these students’ self-efficacy in a history class. The combination of words and images make stories easier to process and, thus, compliment their self-efficacy. If we agree that teachers must promote students’ empathy, as well as critical thinking skills (Para, Picher, & Nillas, 2010), then we may also agree that Sequential Art is a valuable resource for teachers.

**Multi-modal learning.** A great deal of the data collected suggests that multi-modal learning is appealing to students. In focus groups, students were asked, “Within your history class, over the past four weeks, what topic is most memorable to you?” Al answered, “…the war with Japan.” John followed with, “I would say the Germans and the concentration camps” (Figures 5 & 6). Ethel’s choice was, “The Germans and the concentration camps because what happened to them was so awful. When they went to concentration camps, how random the killing was, and how it was discriminatory toward the Jews.” This feedback shows that by seeing the story-images, reading the narrative boxes and reading the dialogue bubbles within the stories, and then discussing those stories, students remember these Sequential Art samples as meaningful. This demonstrates their capacity for multi-modal learning.

When asked, “What are your favorite ways to learn history?” Haley said, “I like to see pictures and visuals. Like when we were learning about World War I and saw all the trenches,
that helped me learn.” Alex claimed, “I like visuals which are detailed. I like graphs which offer a visual measurement. When graphs showed me, last year, the contrast between those who died in the Civil War compare with those who died in all of America’s other wars. It was ten times the rest of them. Hugh insists that, “Pretty much the same as them. I like pictures, videos … pretty much anything I can see. A film on the sinking of the Lusitania that I saw in middle school is an example that helped me better understand World War I.” By their admission, a multi-modal approach, a combination of media, evidently appeals to most students’ learning styles.

The capacity of students to employ multi-modal learning was evident as well. Multi-modal learning is the capacity for a student to learn through visualization, reading, or hearing. Max captured this quality of Sequential Art best when he explained, “I would say it’s kind of like a video game because everyone is reading it and it’s like everyone is playing it so everyone is into it. It’s almost like you’re a part of history. These comic books made [me] think of ‘Call of Duty’ [a video game] and it made me get more into it.” Through his explanation, Max demonstrates that Sequential Art holds the potential of a video game, which means it can appeal to those who learn visually, through reading, or through hearing, demonstrating multi-modal learning.

**Summary.** In examining the data gained through teacher interviews, focus groups, student work, and observations, there is evidence to support the argument that Sequential Art can be a valuable tool in engaging students in historical understanding. Students employed Substantive Concepts, posed historical questions, and evidenced the use of Meta-Concepts and historical methods when discussing history using Sequential Art as a tool for inquiring about the past. As Ms. Smith observed, Sequential Art caused her students to consider and articulate their
positions in relationship to history as they were coming to know it and engage in historical argument.

In addition to students demonstrating the six components of historical understanding, three themes emerged from a review of the teacher interviews, student focus groups, and classroom observations: the use of Sequential Art supported the development of self-efficacy and historical empathy in the classroom as well as multi-modal learning. The data showed that students were confident when analyzing the samples of Sequential Art as artifacts. This medium allowed them to confidently ask questions, share observations, and offer questions. Further, student commentary evidenced that the Sequential Art offered a medium by which they could empathize with the events of the past through the provision of visually portrayed characters. Classroom observations and student commentary also revealed the utility of Sequential Art in providing an opportunity for multi-modal learning, allowing students to examine history through text, visual displays, and argumentation. When questionable values surfaced in the Sequential Art propaganda, or characters of a story were victimized, students displayed empathy by exhibiting distress and expressing concern. Their self-efficacy was evident in the fact that no participant declined an opportunity to engage the Sequential Art, answer questions, or offer an observation.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

This study’s findings include several connections to the literature presented in Chapter II. The literature review focused on four areas, which informed this study. That literature included:

- Teaching History
- Historical Thinking and Understanding
- Primary Sources in Teaching History
Sequential Art in Teaching History

Connections between this study’s findings and this literature is reviewed below.

**Teaching history; historical thinking and understanding.** A review of the literature in the teaching of history presents a clear need for historical understanding among students beyond the memorization of facts and dates (Liu, Shen, Warren, & Cowart, 2006). The findings of this study reveal that students are able to display the components of historical understanding if the instructor employs visuals. While visuals are appealing to students and are the most important part of her instructional routine, Ms. Smith insisted that she needed to alternate her strategies and not be complacent in order to retain her students’ focus.

Teachers can lose their students to disinterest. Lack of interest by students in history and a failure to display historical understanding are obstacles to effective history education (Liu et al., 2006). Too often, learning environments are built on mundane classroom routines that foster memorization but that fail to establish authentic historical understanding or to engage the learning preferences of the modern student (Polman, 2006). Polman (2006) concludes that the routine use of seatwork, continuous recitation, and memorization of facts undermines historical understanding. Sequential Art, within history instruction, can remedy these obstacles to historical understanding by allowing students to conceptualize abstract ideas.

**Primary sources in teaching history.** Like most primary sources (Paras, Piche, & Nillas, 2010), this study finds that Sequential Art in Ms. Smith’s classroom established a shared line of reasoning between the teacher and the students. Throughout the study, Ms. Smith and her students maintained an active dialogue centered on the samples of Sequential Art. A teacher and student share a line of reasoning when they can agree on certain facts and then compose their own subjective interpretation of the past (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007, p. 97).
The findings of this study support the claim that Sequential Art holds great promise as an educational resource. Further, Sequential Art can serve as a primary source. That potential includes the use of Sequential Art to connect the past to the present using visual depictions. Since Sequential Art is a medium that is perhaps more accessible to students, and is an area of interest for them within popular culture, then teachers can employ Sequential Art to support students in their understanding of abstract ideas through multi-modal learning experiences.

Beyond supporting students’ historical understanding, Sequential Art can be used as a literacy tool that supports their study of history with greater confidence (self-efficacy). And use of Sequential Art can give students, as evidenced in this study, the opportunity to display historical empathy. The participants of this study admit that Sequential Art is a medium they are familiar with and can use to quickly learn. The literature claims that those teachers who harness learner interests to create an even stronger learning climate are more likely to succeed (Polman, 2006; Hallden, 1994; McKeown & Beck, 1994). In addition, much of the literature argues that overuse of the textbook impedes historical understanding (Wineburg, 2001; Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996; Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007). Ms. Smith concurs with this claim, insisting that she has to consistently alternate her instructional approach or she will lose the students’ attention. Ms. Smith’s view was corroborated by one student who said, “I really like the comic books because they made you focus and understand it. Just having words makes it confusing; having visuals definitely helps.” Because Sequential Art is a medium that frequently frames different topics in history and reflects the past, it is a sound artifact for historians to use.

**Sequential art in teaching history.** For the same reasons that English scholars underscore the value of Sequential Art as a powerful literacy tool, history teachers can harness it as a resource for fostering historical understanding (Seelow, 2010). At no time in this study did
a student decline an opportunity to read a sample of Sequential Art. A variety of scholars (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996; O’Neill & Weiler, 2006; Tally & Goldenberg, 2005), recognize the academic use of Sequential Art in developing skills that approximate the components that define historical understanding. Ms. Smith’s experience is consistent with those scholars. She emphasized that her experience with Sequential Art exceeded her expectations and she insisted that she will use it again in the future as an integral component of her curriculum planning and pedagogy.

If educators believe that students have the potential to have authentic historical understanding (Van Sledright, 1995), then Sequential Art can complement their history education. By using primary sources (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996; O’Neill & Weiler, 2006; Tally & Goldenberg, 2005), teachers can better support students in establishing historical understanding. Like various primary sources, Sequential Art effectively links the past and the present for students (Cohn, 2009). Like pamphlets, newspapers, and letters from the past, Sequential Art reflects the past. In this study, students displayed a capacity for historical understanding when given the opportunity to examine and use Sequential Art in exploring and thinking about history.

**Historical Literacy, Historical Artifacts, and Cultural Artifacts**

Many scholars argue that the use of multiple texts and documents can greatly impact student learning (Britt, Mason, Rouet, & Perfetti, 1996; Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007). The capacity to examine a variety of sources within the study of history is historical literacy. Most of the participants in this study did not recognize the textbook as an option. For instance, John explained, “I think comic books, when we are reading the comic books, just the dialect people had and [the] pictures that go with it help show the attitude of the writer and the people who
were in the war and what was happening.” Jill concurred, “If someone tried to explain it just through words, I wouldn’t get it. The pictures almost scare you. The images allow you to know how bad it really was.” Clearly, multi-modal learning supported students’ learning.

Simply put, Sequential Art enables students to access abstract ideas through a medium with which they are familiar (Buhle, 2007). Sequential Art can serve as a historical artifact. In the eyes of students, the combination of words and images is easier than literary narrative dealing with the Holocaust, the Pacific campaign, or the eastern front. Since students can access abstract ideas more effectively through Sequential Art, their self-efficacy within the context of a history class can be enhanced. The literature supports this conclusion. If scholars believe that teachers must help students transition from inferential thoughts to logical analysis that is linked to the evidence (Brooks, 2008, p. 145), then reading comic books — with the inherent coupling of words and images — will support not only their understanding but their confidence. This ownership of understanding was displayed during this study. Students were committed to read the stories and all students felt empowered to comment on any of the excerpts provided. It is uncommon to get all students to display such commitment over eleven lessons. Students showed their empowerment by displaying the six components of historical understanding and not relying solely on the textbook.

Resources such as Sequential Art can challenge mundane classroom routines, which foster short-term recall rather than authentic understanding (Liu, Shen, Warren, & Cowart, 2006). While Sequential Art cannot always serve as a historical artifact – because the status of an item as a primary sources is contingent on the question being asked – it may then default to being a cultural artifact. As a piece of American popular culture, Sequential Art is a medium that
certainly reflects our culture. Whether seeking to educate students about literature of the past or our popular culture, Sequential Art is a learning resource.

When students engage historical understanding, they are being asked to conceptualize abstract ideas. How students conceptualize abstract ideas through learning theory, as discussed by David Kolb (1981; 2003) and Lev Vygotsky (1978), forms part of the theoretical framework. That discussion of learning is connected to the six components of historical understanding (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2007).

1. Vygotsky’s student culture, mediating tools for learning, and zone of proximal development
2. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory
3. Six components of historical understanding

**Vygotsky’s theory of student culture, tools for mediating learning, and zone of proximal development.** As a theorist, Vygotsky emphasized student culture, tools for mediating learning, and the zone of proximal development as critical components of learning. Student culture can be a resource for learning by bridging students’ proclivity to engage in play with academic learning (Vygotsky, 1971). In fact, educators can use popular culture to connect academic culture and student culture (Vygotsky, 1986). Recognizing Vygotsky’s views, mediating tools such as language, argument, and visual depictions in a student culture can be used as a means for exploring and investigating academic content. Sequential Art, or colloquially, comic books, is a medium with which most children, to varying degrees, are familiar. This study provides evidence regarding how Sequential Art can be used to facilitate students’ learning in history with a particular emphasis on historical understanding.
As Vygotsky (1971) argued, art can be used as a valuable learning tool. Educators can use art as “mediating tools” to scaffold student understanding to abstract ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). If teachers create a “play-reality,” intellectual stimulation can be encouraged. In this light, the study of the use of Sequential Art in History classes revealed that students often empathized with figures and characters within stories. This proved true, for example, in criticizing propaganda that portrayed the Japanese as sub-human, literally illustrating the impact of the A-bomb from the Japanese perspective, or the spectrum of emotions that soldiers experienced on the battlefront. The teacher is given a mediating tool for learning when they use Sequential Art.

In addition, mediating tools can create a “zone of proximal development,” which allows the teacher to shepherd student learning (1978). By shepherding students through the samples of Sequential Art related to history, Ms. Smith was expanding their zone of development. Much of Vygotsky’s work suggests that educators should establish a learning climate that combines student culture, social interaction, and cultural immersion. To those who disagree with this formula, Vygotsky argued that a student’s capacity to engage popular culture frequently positions them to engage academic culture as well, because their skills often transfer from one domain to the other (1986). Participants within this study who were observed by Ms. Smith to be typically “tuned out” in their learning enjoyed the use of Sequential Art in her curriculum and were intellectually engaged and invested in their learning. To the point that combining words and images are helpful, Joe said, “For me, it makes it easier if I have a visual because the pictures are showing me and the words are telling. Combining words and images helps me learn.” This use of Sequential Art could be characterized as affording such students a means for engaging in a
“zone of proximal development,” providing scaffolding for their engagement through a visually accessible medium.

For many participants, learning history became easier and more enjoyable. Meaningful scaffolding requires a skilled adult to facilitate the learning process for students as they progress in their understanding of higher-level concepts and skills. As Vygotsky argued (1986), what is absolutely necessary for students to succeed is a skilled adult who can support an unskilled pupil. A student’s capacity to speak, their cultural environment, and their self-efficacy influence their academic success (Vygotsky, 1986). The scaffolding, cultural immersion, and vocabulary development were all displayed in Ms. Smith’s efforts to create learning opportunities for her students.

In considering Sequential Art as a learning resource, Max explained, “I think [Sequential Art] is very helpful because you get two get aids. You get the visual aids and you get the word stuff. Having images and words from the people are there; it all sticks in your mind. That is helpful.” Continuing, he said, “I would say it’s kind of like a video game because everyone is reading it and it’s like everyone is playing it so everyone is into it. It’s almost like you’re a part of history. These comic books made think of Call of Duty [a video game] and it made me get more into it.” Like a video game, Sequential Art is born out of student culture and combines words and images, a type of scaffolding, for the benefit of its reader.

**Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory.** The experiential learning cycle, developed by David Kolb (1981, 2003) has four stages. Those stages are converger, diverger, assimilator, and accommodator (Smith, 2010). The converger stage is one in which the learner actively experiments and employs abstract conceptualization. This style employs deductive reasoning. In contrast, the diverger stage is a style in which the learner has concrete experience with reflective
observations (Kolb, 1981). This person can consider ideas from various perspectives. The next stage, the assimilator, is a style that allows a person to consider abstract concepts and reflect through observations. This style positions a learner to exist in the theoretical realm with abstract ideas rather than in dealing with people. The final stage, the accommodator, is a style of concrete experiences and active experimentation. This learner can be identified as a “hands-on” individual who prefers to address problems through intuition.

The key terms that surface in dealing with these four stages are abstract, conceptualization, experimentation, concrete, and reflective. Whatever stage a learner is in, these terms, at one time or another, reflect their position. It could be argued that Sequential Art appeals to every stage because of the coupling of words and images. Simply put, Sequential Art can serve as a medium appealing to the needs of most if not all learners, visually connecting content to graphical representation.

In the focus groups, many students identified subjects other than history as their favorite in school. However, some students later commented that the use of Sequential Art gave them something to look forward to in history class. Sequential Art reengaged students who may have otherwise been “turned off” to the learning of history, typically considered to be simply the memorizing of facts. Kolb (1981) identified the challenge of history teachers when he argued that students often fail because of the mismatch between learning style and the instructional approach. By adopting a multi-modal approach, teachers will increase student learning because students will be empowered to access the content in multiple ways.

The six components of historical understanding. While Kolb and Vygotsky shed light on how people learn, van Drie and van Boxtel’s (2007) six components of historical understanding define what it is to have historical understanding. If the only access point a
teacher provides students is through textbooks, then most students will not have gained an authentic historical understanding (Wolsey, 2008, p. 121). The comments of many participants correspond with John’s view, which was that, “I really like the comic book idea because it helps me understand the attitude of the people of the time. What, you know, we look at a picture and have our opinion but to have a drawing from the people from the time helps us see what they see.” The six components of understanding offered a ready framework for how to categorize both the literature and the evidence collected for this study.

As reviewed above in detail, the six components of historical understanding as put forth by van Drie and van Boxtel (2007) are Substantive Concepts, Meta-Concepts, use of sources, historical questions, contextualization, and argumentation. Sequential Art helps establish a common line of reasoning that ultimately leads to developing the six components of historical understanding in high school students taking American History. This study reveals that these components are mutually dependent on each other. Three themes, which complement the six components of historical understanding, emerged in this study as well. Those themes were multi-modal learning, historical empathy, and self-efficacy. The six components of historical understanding are like a chain made up of six links. Without one of those links, a person’s historical understanding is incomplete. These components, in my view, are mutually reliant on one other. No component can operate independent of the others.

Limitations

While this study considers a purposeful sampling that offered meaningful data, it is a study limited to twenty-one students in the classroom of one teacher in a single school and district. While suggesting evidence to support the use of Sequential Art in the teaching of history, the study does not benefit from an exploration and formal investigation of how
Sequential Art can benefit history instruction across dozens of teachers, across several content areas in history, or across several contexts. The study, in terms of students, teachers, and contexts, does not reflect diversity. As a case study, it is by nature qualitative and thus can not offer any statistical data and depends upon the triangulation of data drawn from focus groups, teacher interviews, observations, as well as student work.

**Challenges to the Process**

The challenges to this process were varied. As an Assistant Principal, it was a challenge to meet my duties and complete the observations necessary for this study. In the face of any challenge, I found participants to be patient, cooperative, and invested. The limitation and challenges to this study included practical obstacles and the temptation to employ alternative designs.

Day-to-day obstacles included several school cancellations and early dismissals due to inclement weather; observations and focus groups had to be rescheduled. This was compounded by the circumstances that participants could not strictly adhere to their original focus groups during the second session due to doctor’s appointments and athletic commitments. Regardless, focus groups were meaningful and informed. Another practical challenge was my role as Assistant Principal, the school’s primary disciplinarian. This obstacle was overcome by employing name recognition over all twenty-one students and emphasizing my assignment as the privileged observer and not as the disciplinarian. Students, as a result of this study, no longer saw me as the imposing Assistant Principal but rather as an educator interested in their learning. From all accounts, they truly enjoyed the experience and shared their insights about Sequential Art willingly.
One of the supreme challenges of this study was not to be tangential. While this study is a descriptive case study that deals with college preparation students, it could have had any number of designs. Initially, a comparison study seemed possible, but that risked considering how the educators taught over how the students learned. This study could have had a more focused lens that considered which type of Sequential Art has the largest impact on students’ learning. Those types of Sequential Art are political cartoons, comic book covers, comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels. Another idea was the possibility of examining how Special Education students would respond to a study designed for them incorporating Sequential Art. As a former Special Education student, I found this appealing but impractical because it might be misconstrued as insensitive. Special Education students may have seen this study as an insult to their self-esteem. Another possibility was to create a series of exercises to aid students in organizing their writing with corresponding visuals, producing their own comic books based on historical themes.

This study was not an effort to replace but rather to supplement the standing curriculum. Many studies seek to include an urban school perspective; this study offers a perspective that is rooted in a suburban school. Its data are drawn from a convenience sampling from over four weeks and considers a single curriculum unit. This research study could have considered multiple units, over several months. If this project had been a quantitative study, its data may have been more scientific, in my opinion, but would have failed to provide a vehicle for the authentic voices furnished through the focus groups, interviews, observations, and student work.

Significance of the Study

The evidence collected and examined in this study supports the claim that Sequential Art may be an effective learning tool that appeals to students in the development of their historical understanding. Nick offered a comment representative of this evidence:
History is usually a lot of reading and notes, but this was fun. You kind of looked at a picture and decided what it meant. It helps bring back the stuff you’ve already learned and interact with the others. It was fun. You were getting everyone else’s point of view and if you didn’t understand something, they helped you. People in your group would explain it; that was nice.

The evidence reveals that Sequential Art can also support historical empathy. Ms. Smith claimed that before reading the Sequential Art excerpt on the A-bomb, all students would have supported the decision to drop the bomb. After reading the packet, she explained that all had mixed emotions and many would have decided against dropping the bomb. Corroboration for Smith’s view is seen in Jill’s comment:

The most memorable thing would probably be the comic strip, umm, when we saw the Japanese family had the bomb dropped on them. We usually learn about the war from America’s perspective and now we saw it from [the Japanese] family’s perspective.”

If a primary source, like Sequential Art, can sway the established position of students like this, then it has educational value.

The evidence confirms that Sequential Art complements student self-efficacy. Ethel explained that,

They are definitely helpful in some way like when you have an actual picture of people that is sad, a cartoon is different. A cartoon shows you their emotions; cartoons show the emotions behind a picture. You don’t have to be serious all the time with cartoons.

Cartoons make you laugh while pictures are depressing.

Al added, “With the comic books, I mean, it just helps so much. I understand things when I look at them and I understand better.” By infusing Sequential Art with classroom instruction as a
primary source, students may be able to begin thinking like historians who value such primary source materials. Sequential Art fosters student self-efficacy because it is a medium with which most are familiar.

Finally, this study suggests how Sequential Art can be used as a valuable resource for multi-modal learning. Ms. Smith expressed her surprise at the degree that Sequential Art fostered the use of higher order thinking among her students. Hugh summed it up well, saying, “If you just describe, [the students] don’t really process it. I really like the comic books because they made you focus and understand it. Just having words makes it confusing; having visuals definitely helps.”

This claim is attested to by John, who said,

For me, it makes it easier if I have a visual because the pictures are showing me and the words are telling. Combining words and images helps me learn. When Ms. Smith was talking about the Pacific like Guadalcanal or the beaches in Normandy and stuff like that. If she was just talking about it, I can’t… it would be hard to picture what it looked like because I wasn’t there because I wasn’t born there. If she has a picture to show me then I can understand more.

Continuing, he explained that, “Adding [pictures and words] together can kinda help because, for propaganda, you can what people’s attitude towards the war was through the pictures. It’s cool.” This comment is representative of much of the feedback students shared; they all agreed they needed learning tools that had a visual component.

Next Steps. More important than what students preferred is the fact that they found Sequential Art meaningful. Ethel explained that without Sequential Art, “It is just like, boring. I really don’t pay attention because you’re not learning anything. I do not want to see just words; I want to see
pictures from the time period so I can see what it was like and not just told to me. [Sequential Art] makes it easy to learn.” Ethel’s comments were supported by John, who said:

The most helpful were the big stories, the actual comic books, in my mind especially the D-Day one, we read. Also the atomic bomb one because it helps shows what was happening with all the different slides to the people grabbing their stuff. At the beginning, it showed a family that was living during the time and the son going off to war. Then it showed the family getting bombed and all that.

In this comment alone, we can recognize several components of historical understanding. The study clearly shows that Sequential Art supports historical understanding, but to what degree is questionable. To address those questions, research should continue in the area of Sequential Art as a multi-modal learning source and a tool that promotes student self-efficacy and historical empathy within the high school history class. These three themes are the gaps that scholars can address in the literature.

We are more of a multi-modal society than ever before; we rely on the visual as well as the spoken word. Sequential Art should not be excluded from the history classroom if it supports historical understanding. This study enhances our understanding of how students learn history and it shows one pathway toward improving our system of history education. Historical understanding is enhanced by the instructional use of Sequential Art.

Conclusion

This study argues that, like the Rosetta-Stone – the tablet discovered by Napoleon that allowed archaeologists to decode Egyptian hieroglyphics – Sequential Art allows learners to conceptualize abstract ideas easily. The use of Sequential Art as a primary source may allow history teachers to meet their curriculum pacing requirements while fostering historical skills and
concepts among students. This study shows that instructors may be able to attend to literacy, disciplinary reasoning, popular culture, and authentic learning through the use of Sequential Art in their classrooms.

Sequential Art appeals to those who see history class as the memorization of facts rather than the authentic understanding of the past. Sequential Art, by challenging mundane classroom routines, supports students in conceptualizing abstract ideas through multi-modal learning while promoting the qualities of self-efficacy and historical empathy. This study suggests that there is educational value in the classroom use of Sequential Art through the lens offered by the six components of historical understanding. Through this medium that couples images and words, students are more likely to engage abstract ideas. The participants claim that history is easier with Sequential Art; it reveals an ingredient for fostering student self-efficacy. Given these findings, teachers, not just in history but in all subjects, may want to consider the use of Sequential Art as a modality and vehicle for their instruction. The body of evidence – drawn from the teacher interviews, focus groups, student work, and observations in this study – supports the belief that Sequential Art can be a learning tool that enhances student engagement and promotes an authentic understanding of history.
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Appendix A: You are invited to Participate in a Research Study

Dear (name of prospective participant),

My name is John Gould. I am a student at Northeastern University and I am planning to conduct a study at your school in order to gain more understanding about how high school students learn and retain historical understanding using Sequential Art within a class. As the curriculum team leader of the Social Studies Department, your experience connects to this study.

Your class offers a perfect sampling of students to consider the ways in which Sequential Art is valuable in contextualizing history. By incorporating Sequential Art into your lessons for four weeks, you are making this study possible. By sharing your experience you are providing access to the necessary data that will inform this study.

If you are interested in participating in this research project, please contact me before February 1st so I can provide you with more details about the study. You can reach me at xxx-xxx-xxxx (ext. xxx). Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to working with you.

Respectfully,

John Gould

CC: Principal, Superintendent, & Teacher Association President
Appendix B: Disclosure Statement and Consent to Participate in a Research Study

**Project Title:** Historical understanding is rooted in the use of primary sources

**Investigators:** John Gould, Doctoral Student, Dr. Christopher Unger, Principal Investigator

The goal of this study is to examine how Sequential Art can support the historical understanding of students. In order to better examine this phenomenon, this study will document the learning of United States History within a high school classroom for four weeks.

As a participant in this study you will be asked to:

1. Participate in two focused, confidential, audio-taped interviews lasting one hour each.
2. Talk about your experiences on student historical understanding.
3. Be available for follow-up questions if needed.
4. Review my interpretations of your responses to ensure that I have accurately represented your points of view.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. As a participant you may decline to answer any of the interview questions during the interview and may withdraw from the study at any time with no questions asked.

There is no compensation for participating in this project. However you may find satisfaction in having the opportunity to tell your story and share you insights with others.

Confidentiality will be maintained to the greatest extent possible, although certain members of the education department at Northeastern University will have access to certain types of information. For example, as part of the approval process the name of the school district and your school have already been disclosed to the superintendent, the principal, the principal investigator of this study Dr. Christopher Unger at Northeastern University, and the IRB approval department at Northeastern University. However the researchers will take every
possible step from this point forward to maintain the confidentiality of all participants. They will not disclose your name to anyone at any time during the interview process or in any publication associated with this study, without your written permission to do so. The audiotape of all interviews will be destroyed once the data analysis process has been completed. A fictitious name for both the school district and your school has already been created. Your school will be named King George Regional High School and its three towns will be Wayside, Pleasanton, and Northdale. This is being done so that any reader will not be able to identify you as a participant or the exact location of the study.

If you any questions or concerns regarding this disclosure statement you can contact John Gould at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You may also leave a confidential voice mail at xxx-xxx-xxxx (ext. xxx) or contact him via email. Questions or concerns may also be directed to Dr. Christopher Unger, Principal Investigator at xxx-xxx-xxxx. For questions regarding your rights as a research participant you can contact Nan Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, at [address] or xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Please sign below to indicate that you have read this disclosure statement and consent to participate in this research study.

_________________________________     ___________ __
Signature of Prospective Research Participant    Date
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

I am interested in learning as much as possible about your thoughts and feelings related to teaching history and the use of artifacts. I am focusing on six components that form an individual’s historical understanding.

I will engage you in a focused interview three times in an open-ended manner. During that time I will conduct a semi-structured interview with you. Semi-structured means that I have a set of questions to ask, but there is also a lot of room to discuss other issues as they come up. I will first ask you general questions about the atmosphere in the class and to what degree you think Sequential Art supports students’ historical understanding. Then we will spend the remainder the time talking about your day-to-day classroom experiences.

Interview Questions:

1. How do students demonstrate that they have a competent historical understanding?
2. What is the profile of the typical student in your class?
3. How have you used artifacts in the past?
4. How do you motivate students to learn Substantive Concepts?
5. How do you get students to grasp Meta-Concepts?
6. Do you routinely foster opportunities for students to employ argumentation?
7. Commonly, do your students compose historical questions?
8. How do you commonly contextualize history for your students?
9. What sources, beyond the traditional text book, do you employ?
10. In your classroom experience, what learning strategies are the most effective?

Follow up Questions:

1. What defines competent historical understanding?
2. Did this process reveal anything about your students?

3. How are the samples of Sequential Art different from the artifacts you have used in the past?

4. How did students meaningfully display Substantive Concepts through the curricular use of Sequential Art?

5. How did students meaningfully employ Meta-Concepts when engaging lessons that utilized pieces of Sequential Art?

6. How did Sequential Art prompt discussions, or argumentation, amongst students?

7. How did Sequential Art prompt historical questions amongst students?

8. How does Sequential Art contextualize history for students?

9. What value, if any, did you see in the curricular use of Sequential Art?

10. In terms of teaching and learning strategies, where does Sequential Art fit?
Appendix D: Focus-Group Protocol

Questions to be piloted for student focus groups after the first two weeks –Interview Guide 1 (30 minutes)

Guide 1 (30 minutes)

1. What is your favorite subject?
2. What is your favorite way to learn (i.e.: Chalk and Talk, Group Work, Four Corners, etc.)?
3. What are your favorite topics in history?
4. What are your favorite ways to learn history?
5. If you were our school’s principal, what strategies might you insist teachers use?
6. Why do these strategies work for you?
7. What primary source did you find most helpful in your learning and why?

Guide 2 (30 minutes)

1. Within your history class, over the past four weeks, what topic is most memorable to you?
2. How did your teacher convey and discuss that topic?
3. What skills do you think you need to have to be a good history student?
4. What is the difference when you engage history without Sequential Art?
5. Explain how images like cartoons, comic strips, or visuals – what I call Sequential Art – are, or are not, helpful in learning?
6. How might the use of Sequential Art, as a primary source, be a fun way to learn?
7. Which sample of Sequential Art did you find helpful and why?

Appendix E
Parental Informed Consent: As an artifact of youth culture, Sequential Art (the medium of comic books) is a valuable resource for educators. This study will examine student historic understanding of World War II by using excerpts of Sequential Art, or comic books, as learning artifacts.

Study Name: Historical Understanding is rooted in the use of primary sources

Sponsors: John Gould, Assistant Principal and doctoral student at Northeastern University; Dr. Christopher Unger, Advisor

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of the study is to examine the value of Sequential Art and how it contributes positively to students’ learning in the history class.

What Your Child Will Be Asked to do in the Research: As a participant of this study, I will observe your child’s class and invite a number of class members to partake in group interviews that will be audio recorded. Questions will pertain to their understanding of history and to their use of learning artifacts.

Risks and Discomforts: I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your child’s participation in the research. The samples of Sequential Art are age-appropriate.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to Your Child: This research examines how students learn history and challenges your student to learn in a fun way. The study encourages students to think independently and supports the Massachusetts Social Science Frameworks.

Voluntary Participation: Your child’s participation in the study is completely voluntary and your child can request not participate at any time. Withdrawal from the study will not impact the relationship with the researcher.

Confidentiality: Any collected data will be and your child’s name will not appear on any report. Coded data will only be used for purposes of completing this doctoral study. For one year, notes
and data will be secured for one year and destroyed in an appropriate manner after that time. Confidentiality will be maintained to the fullest possible extent. As required by Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board protocol, student confidentiality will be maintained by coding their identities within the study.

Questions about the Research? If you any questions or concerns regarding this disclosure statement you can contact John Gould at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You may also leave a confidential voice mail at xxx-xxx-xxxx (ext. xxx) or contact him via email. Questions or concerns may also be directed to Dr. Christopher Unger, Principal Investigator at xxx-xxx-xxxx. For questions regarding your rights as a research participant you can contact Nan Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, at [address] or xxx-xxx-xxxx.

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Detach and submit to (designate teacher)

I, ________________________________, consent to have my child participate in “Historical Understanding is rooted in the use of primary sources” conducted by John Gould. I understand the nature of this project and wish my child to participate; I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature indicates my consent.

(Formed from Fisher, 2005, p. 196)
Appendix F - Observation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Actions</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>Claims of Six Components of Historical Understanding</th>
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Appendix G

KING PHILIP REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

September 28, 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

RE: John Gould

Please accept this letter as certification that John Gould has been employed as a High School Assistant Principal with the King Philip Regional School District from November 18, 2010, to the present. I have given Mr. Gould permission to conduct his dissertation research at King Philip.

High School History teacher, Melinda Morin, has volunteered to assist Mr. Gould in his research.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Elizabeth A. Zielinski
Superintendent of Schools

/ebw
Appendix H: NIH Research Certification

Protecting Human Subject Research Participants

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that John Gould successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course “Protecting Human Research Participants”.

Date of completion: 04/23/2010

Certification Number: 437332