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A Picture's Worth

Analyzing Historical Photographs

A picture can be worth a thousand words—and maybe a lot more. Imagine the response of students as their teacher holds up a black-and-white photo in which vintage cars fill a city street. A curved sign, “THEATRES,” arches over the traffic, and people line the sidewalks. She asks: “What do you think is going on in this old picture? Talk to the person sitting next to you and see if you agree with each other.”

Students strain to get a better view. After allowing a few minutes for discussion, the teacher asks for ideas and their reasoning. Abilio thinks it must be a parade because of all the old cars; Leneisha suggests people are “hanging out” on the streets after work, because that’s what her father and his friends do. Other students mention shopping or going to the movies.

The teacher records these contributions on the board under two headings: *What people are doing* and *Why we think so*. “Those are good suggestions, and you’ve done a good job of giving reasons for your ideas. Today you’re going to begin looking at other old pictures I’ve downloaded from the Internet. Together with your partners, you’ll keep track of what you think is going on in each picture, and why you think so.”

The Basics of Authentic Instruction

In recent years, educators have stressed the need to engage students in authentic tasks—those that resemble the challenges people face outside of school, whether as professionals, consumers, family members, or citizens. In the teaching of history, authentic instruction involves students directly in the analysis and interpretation of historical information. Such instruction includes:

- Formulating historical questions or problems.
- Gathering information from a variety of sources.
- Evaluating the authenticity and reliability of sources.
- Comparing conflicting accounts.
- Taking the perspective of people in the past, and
- Connecting disparate pieces of information into coherent explanations.

Such skills are by no means the exclusive preserve of academic historians; they are used by those who trace family histories, report the news, design an exhibit in a museum, or create a documentary. We all use these skills when we judge the accuracy and meaning of the evening news, fiction and nonfiction books, museum displays, films, and family recollections. The ability to analyze and interpret historical information is crucial in helping us judge the reliability and meaning of stories from the past.

What Children Bring to the Classroom

For children in the early grades, visual materials—both photographs and other kinds of pictures—tap into a wider range of historical information than do activities based solely on oral or written language. Children often become familiar with the past through television programs, family pictures, or outings to historic sites, so their historical understanding depends on recognizing visual details. As a result, even children as young as six years old are capable of using pictures to make comparisons with the present, to put historical periods in sequence, to describe historical changes in terms of cause and effect, to take on the perspectives of people in the past, and to develop their own historical questions.

From a practical perspective, children enjoy working with pictures, particularly those that include people—they like looking at such images, talking about them, and trying to figure out what’s going on in them. All of these factors make the use of pictures a highly enticing and productive method of instruction.

Analyzing photographs, however, also calls for skills that children rarely develop without explicit instruction and practice. Placing a photo into a larger historical context is one such skill. Students often can describe and discuss the details of photographs, but they do not pull these details together into an overall understanding of the theme of the picture or how it relates to the historical period when it was produced. When students do try to provide a context for pictures, they often base their attempts on highly personalized or present-day situations, rather than any broader body of historical information. They may know a great deal about how life has changed over time, but young children tend to see pictures as sets of isolated details rather than as evidence of life at particular times in history.

A Lesson Plan for Analyzing an Authentic Photograph

When using historical pictures in the classroom, teachers should assume that students will need the most help drawing their observations together to reach conclusions about the lives of people at a particular time. Sets of photographs—along with probing questions and graphic organizers—can help students develop these important skills of authentic historical inquiry.

With students who have never analyzed historical photographs in school, the teacher will need to begin by modeling the process with a single picture that the entire class can examine together. Then students should work in pairs or small groups to analyze photographs focusing on a range of topics. If enough photographs are available, the group might have a set on businesses, another on schools, and others on leisure activities, technology, transportation, celebrations, homes, and so on. For children to become experienced in skills of historical analysis the activity cannot be a one-time affair; students will need to repeat the process on more than one occasion, with pictures from more than one time period.

Before seeing their set of photographs, the groups should identify what they expect to see (or not see). For example, if the subjects of the photographs are businesses, students should say what they think will be different about businesses in the 1940s, compared to the present, and what things they think will be the same. This process helps students activate their prior learning as well as compare that knowledge more systematically to the new information from the photographs. Once they begin examining their set of pictures, students should record the

similarities and differences they see. Graphic organizers, such as an observation chart can help students keep track of their information: younger students or those who have trouble writing should record information orally by telling the teacher, an aide, or one another. Many of the differences are quickly apparent. Some of the similarities are also striking. As already noted, making such observations is a strength for most students, and they invariably find details of the pictures that escape the notice of adults.

After making observations, students need to move to a higher level of analysis by reaching simple inferences about what they see in the pictures. They can begin by explaining what they think is going on in each and by identifying the clues they use. Students should respond to the following questions:

- Where do you think the pictures were taken?
- What do you think people are doing in each picture?
- What time of day or what day of the week was it taken? How long ago?
- And why do you think so? (This question applies to the three previous questions.)

Although some of these inferences may be easy to make, they serve the purpose of moving students beyond simple descriptions and involving them in drawing conclusions from their observations, which is a fundamental task of historical analysis. A graphic organizer may help students record their ideas in a systematic way.

At an even high level of analysis, students should begin to draw more general conclusions by relating what they see in the pictures to the broader patterns of people's lives. Although this can begin with a general question, such as "What do these pictures tell you about life at the time?", students need a great deal of help with such tasks. Teachers should work closely with each group and guide students with probing questions that call attention to the implications of the objects and activities depicted. A teacher working with students who have the set of pictures, might stimulate their discussion by asking such questions as the following:

- Do you think these people made things for themselves or bought them from others?
- What kinds of work do you think these people did?
- Do you think advertising was important then?
- What do you think stores were like?
- How do you think people got from one place to another?

These are only examples for one set of pictures; teachers will have to use their professional judgment to adapt questions to each group of students and each set of materials.

An important part of helping students reach conclusions about the past is drawing their attention to the diversity within groups of pictures. What might account for these differences? How might the lives of people have been different depending on which of these places they lived? Understanding the range of life-styles at a given time is a crucial component of historical understanding. Rather than thinking that any time in history can be represented by a single image, students might come to understand that people in different places (or from different economic backgrounds, or ethnicities, or sexes) may have had very different lives at the same point in history. Comparing pictures can help students see that point.

Comparison is also a basic skill of historical analysis: students should compare their findings within their own groups and between groups. In a class discussion, students will hear their classmates' conclusions about life at the time. They should examine the evidence for those conclusions and evaluate whether they agree. Such comparisons help students better understand the diversity of life-styles at a given time.

With teacher guidance in recognizing discrepancies, students will come to develop their own questions about history, and they will begin to see areas they need to know more about in order to reach firmer conclusions. Teachers may want to encourage them to consult people, nonfiction books, or more photographs to find answers to their questions. For times like the 1940s, when their grandparents may have been children, students can develop interview questions based on their analysis of photographs.

Finally, students should draw together their findings from photographs, books, people, and other sources to create displays, drawings, or presentations about the period they've studied. This is historical inquiry at its most authentic, because students are making observations from primary sources, drawing conclusions, comparing findings with others, investigating new sources to answer emerging questions, and reporting their findings (that is, variations on the six steps on authentic instruction). With accessible sources like photographs, even young children can begin to develop these important skills.

Sources of Historical Photographs

Obtaining authentic historical material from any source calls for some investigation, sorting, evaluation, and selection by the teacher. By using material from several different sources, teachers can develop complete and well-rounded sets of photographs for classroom use.

Some school and local libraries have collections of images that can be freely used and reproduced, so it's worth checking out that local resource.

A general source that requires some effort to use—but can have a tremendous payoff—is the World Wide Web. I have found that two of the most useful websites are those of the National Archives and Records Administration (www.nara.gov) and the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (lcweb.loc.gov/rr/print). Both sites have many thousands of images (photographs and other visual sources) on a wide range of subject matter, from the entire span of American history. Although not all of the images have been digitized, a growing number have been. These images can be reviewed on-line and ordered or downloaded. In most cases, they are in the public domain and can be used without restriction. Both sites can also be searched by key words, making it easy to locate pictures on specific topics, such as schools, cars, farming, factories, and so on.

Family photographs can provide a direct and personal connection to what students are studying in the classroom. Asking students to bring in photographs from a particular time also takes some of the planning burden off the teacher, and it involves students in small-scale historical investigations with their families. Family photographs, however, are unlikely to provide a complete source of information for the classroom. First of all, some students will not have any

available. Second, many family snapshots focus on a narrow range of activities, such as family outings or leisure activities, rather than the full scope of topics students need to learn about. Because of these reasons, it is useful to have a few appropriate images at the ready.

Some education supply companies have quality images. Social Studies School Service, for example, sells sets such as “America Revisited: 1880-1900,” as well as “U.S. History Photo Aids” on topics such as slavery and the American West. An educational foundation, Americans All, also sells sets of historical photographs focusing on immigration and ethnic diversity in U.S. history.

The advantage of commercial sources is that large numbers of professionally reproduced photographs can be obtained quickly and inexpensively; in some cases, the purchase price includes the right to reproduce the pictures for classroom use. The disadvantage is that these sets sometimes focus on famous people or important political events; they do not always include the scenes of everyday life that are useful for a class lesson.

Conclusion

The use of historical photographs in the classroom is a practical way of engaging young children in authentic historical inquiry. Research in both the United States and the United Kingdom shows that students as young as six can analyze the details of pictures from times past and compare them to life today. Teachers should build on those strengths by having students analyze historical photographs regularly, and then helping them move beyond simple observation and comparison to reach broader conclusions about life in the past.

Like any meaningful classroom activity, this kind of analysis and interpretation requires careful planning. Teachers will have to adapt the activities described here for the specific needs and abilities of their own students. Younger children, for example, require direct guidance and need to report their conclusions orally: students in third grade and above, on the other hand, may be able to work more independently and record their findings in written form. Similarly, the activities described here may be an end in themselves for younger students, whereas for older children, they can serve as an introduction to the analysis of other sources—paintings, diaries, letters, and so on.

Whatever the adaptation necessary in each setting, teachers who emphasize the analysis and interpretation of historical evidence will be actively preparing students for critical citizenship skills that lie at the heart of the social studies.

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